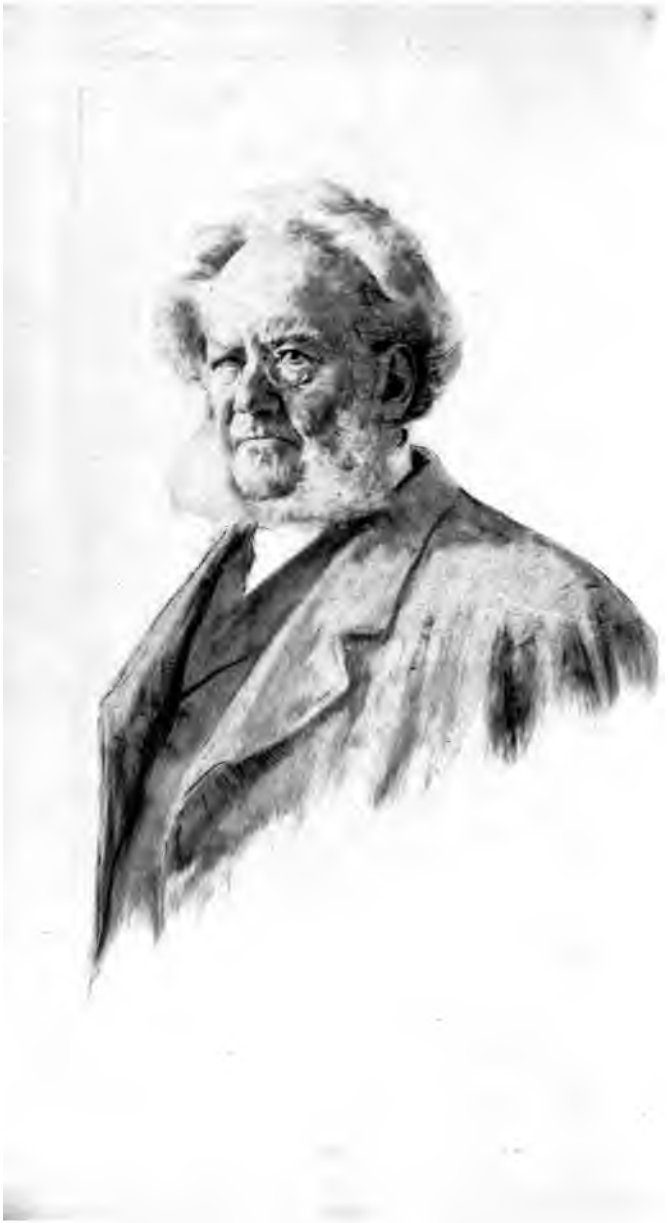

The Ibsen Secret

A Key to the Prose Dramas of Henrik Ibsen

By

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G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1907

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

To

GERALD STANLEY LEE

"And yet—
I cannot quite forget
That in the underdawn of dreams
I have felt the faint surmise
Shining through the starry deep of my sleep
That I with God went singing once
Up and down with suns and storms
Through the phantom-pillared forms
And stately-silent naves
And thunder-dreaming caves
Of Heaven."

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THE IBSEN SECRET

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I

IBSEN'S ATTITUDE

IN Jaeger's *Life of Ibsen* there is a letter written by a playmate of Ibsen's, touching his life as a boy. An incident in it prefigures the man as accurately as if it had been written for the purpose:

He got leave to appear, on certain Sunday afternoons, as a magician in one of the rooms of the house, and all the neighbours around were invited to witness the performance. I see him distinctly in his short jacket, standing behind a large chest that was decorated and draped for the occasion, and there he presided over performances that appeared like witch-

craft to the amazed spectator. Of course I knew that his younger brother, well paid for his assistance, was inside the chest. The brother had stipulated for pay by threatening a scandal if it were withheld, and as that would have been, to a boy with Henrik's disposition, the most dreadful thing that could have happened, he always promised everything that the other demanded.

One can safely guess that Ibsen, the man, has never revealed the secret of his work. He may, or may not, have left to us an autobiography. It will contain no key to set alien fingers prying at the lock. But he has set us all looking for keys.

Georg Brandes, his confidential admirer and expounder, says of him, "Ibsen has no symbolism," and Ibsen smiles tighter. M. Émile Faguet rises to his defence, "Ibsen makes use of symbolism"; Mr. William Morton

Payne goes a step further, saying "Symbolism is nearly always to be found in his writings"; Mr. Edmund Gosse says one thing, and Mr. William Archer another; and throughout these elucidations of his art, Ibsen smiles his scowl and scowls his smile, unchanged. "He is a symbolist." "He is not a symbolist." It is one to him. The spectacle we have had of him, of late years, sitting aloft to the North, listening with bristling smile while his critics have said of him, now this thing and now that, has come to be one of the good things of life.

That he himself knows the hidden spring that operates in his plays, the touch that makes them seize upon the heart, causing loathing and pity and terror—through the simplest means,—

II

AN ILLUSTRATION OF SYMBOLISM: "A DOLL'S HOUSE"

A *DOLL'S HOUSE* has had dozens of problems propounded for it. We have heard them—after the theatre, at women's clubs, at teas: "Did Nora do right to leave her husband?" "Was their marriage an ideal one?" "Is a marriage that is not ideal a real marriage?" "Ought Nora to have deceived her husband?" "Was she justified in forging the note?" "Is one ever justified in breaking a law?" "Was Nora's conduct ideal?" "Does Ibsen believe in marriage without

mutual trust?" "Ought married women to eat candy?"

The real problem of the play is perhaps a little more concrete than any one of these and more universal than all of them. The conception of a problem play as one in which some problem of modern life is discussed by the characters and worked out in the plot is foreign to Ibsen, as to all great artists. His plays deal with situations and characters from modern life and are, in so far, allied to the problem play. But they do not present problems, in the ordinary sense of the word, nor do they solve them.

Joseph Conrad, in *Youth*, mentions two kinds of tales,—one, the meaning of which envelops it like a haze; the other, in which the meaning lies in the tale itself, like the kernel of

a nut. To these might be added a third class, in which the meaning is partly within the tale and partly without—a soft, alluring haze, mysterious, far-reaching, and suggestive, lit up, now and then, by gleams of light flashed upon it from within. Ibsen's meanings belong to this third class. The symbol is clearly given, and the plot; but around them and enveloping them is a meaning of which one gets glimpses, now and again, tantalizing and elusive. One feels that there is a hidden meaning. He tries to find it by reading deeper into the text. But it eludes him. It is not there. The real problem will not be guessed till he looks outside the play itself, and then only as it is revealed in flashes, by gleams thrown upon it, from within, by character and plot and symbol. If one

would understand a play, he must first understand the character about which the play circles, and he will not understand the character till he grasps the symbol that lies at the heart of it.

The problem of *A Doll's House*, for instance, is not concerned with the marriage relations of Nora and Helmer, but with the character of Nora. The question whether she had a right to forge the note that saved her husband's life is of far less importance than the fact that she is what she is, and that as she is, she will face life and find herself. In so far as this is a problem, it might be the problem of any playwright, from Shakespeare to Bernard Shaw.

When the play opens, seven years after the forging of the note, and she comes upon the stage, a gay, dancing,

twittering, flitting spirit, she is laden with Christmas gifts for the children—a horse and sword, trumpets and dolls and cradles—tiny things, inexpensive and useless and full of love. She carries, too, the little bag of macaroons on which she nibbles, assuring Helmer, when he sternly questions her, that she has not touched one. His "little lark" he calls her, his "squirrel" and "spendthrift." She is charming and dishonest, always flitting, never resting, a light-headed, light-hearted, inconsequent thing. A deeper note sounds in the music and the reader is startled by the revelation that this flippant creature has been carrying for years a secret and a burden that would have wrecked a heavier nature. The character is improbable, impossible; yet something in the telling of it holds

one to a sense of reality. She has her little presents for the children, the Christmas tree, the macaroons, the surprise for Torvald, and last, and most important, her costume for the fancy-dress ball. She is to dance the tarantelle, the Neapolitan dance that her husband has taught her. She is eager to dance it well for his sake and for her own.

The tarantelle is the play.

Coming in the natural course of the play, it seems a simple stage device, a mere feature of the fancy-dress ball, which, in its turn, is an episode of the play. But the tarantelle is not an ordinary dance. It is named for the tarantula, and its swift movement and dizzying rounds are measured to the victims of that poisonous sting. Round and round, in frenzied, hurrying course,

swifter and swifter—laughter and chatter and flight—till they drop dead. Only a miracle may save them.

The tarantelle is the symbol of Nora. Its wild, unresting movement is the tragedy of her nature—light and frivolous on the surface, but concealing underneath a dread secret,—a wound that carries death in its train. It is the grewsome climax of Nora's doll life, and it is placed where the chief symbol of Ibsen's play is always placed, at the climax of the play. It is the culmination of the plot. The action approaches it and ebbs from it. It is a torch set at the apex, flaring both ways.

Looking backward, by its light, Nora is no longer an inconsequent, impossible character. She is consistent throughout. Her inconsequence is the

essence of her nature. She must always dance and flit and sing while her heart is heavy. The poison is in her veins, a part of her life. How it came there is unimportant. That she herself held the horrible, crawling thing to her bosom, pressing it close, and closer as it stung, lest it should escape her and harm those she loved, is unimportant. These things are beside the action. Only a miracle can save her now—the miracle of Torvald's love. And if the miracle should be that he should take upon himself her misery, that Krogstad should sting him as he has stung her! She does not for a minute guess that the poison in her veins is not of Krogstad's doing, that he, and he alone, is not responsible for her misery. To her he is the vile, crawling thing that has thrust his

fangs into her—as he may into Torvald! No, it shall not be. Torvald shall not take it upon himself—this dull, helpless ache, this melancholy fight—and always the wild desire to dance and sing and laugh, till one drops dead. The miracle shall never be! . . . Then she discovers Torvald's real nature—its selfishness, its meanness—and she herself performs the miracle that sets her free. The wild dance is over. The poison has left her veins. She sees with clear eyes. "Yes, I have changed my dress." Her life is no longer a masquerade. She will no longer dance while her heart is breaking. She leaves her doll's house. Only "the miracle of miracles" can bring her back.

I have chosen *A Doll's House* for a first illustration of Ibsen's symbolism because it is well known and because

the tarantelle is at once more obvious and more subtle than many of the other symbols used. The symbol is, however, less finished than in other plays and will not bear too close application in detail, though it fits the play in its essential points. Dr. Rank, Nora's double in concealed disease, and Krogstad, her double in crime, both appear upon the scene for the last time during the tarantelle dance—that is, at the climax of the play. All the movement is directed toward this symbol. Everything hinges on it. It is the superficial motive of the play, toward which external events move, and it stands for the character in whose nature the real movement of the play takes place. The meaning of the play, which will be taken up later, can not be understood unless this symbol and its bearing

can not be doubted. The plays are as intricate, as finished, as simple, as cunningly fashioned as a nest of Chinese boxes. Symbol within symbol they lie—each complete in itself and each finished and perfect, giving no hint of the unguessed symbols within reaching to the heart of the matter itself. It is a conscious art, but none the less beautiful and wonderful. The art of Shakespeare may be infinite. That of Ibsen is likewise infinite—infinitely small, infinitely finished, infinitely suggestive. The infinity of smallness has, too, its mysteries, its fascinations. The seed that lies in the hand holds infinity in its brown husk, as truly as all-enclosing space.

Of his work Ibsen himself is the supreme symbol hidden in silence and in snow, sending forth his ventures

year after year, with no hint of the cunning freightage they carry, concealed in bales of flax and wool, in tons of coal and grain and salt.

III

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION OF SYMBOLISM: "HEDDA GABLER"

ON the surface Hedda Gabler is as unlike as possible to Nora Helmer. From the moment she appears on the scene she moves with deadly precision. Yet there is about her, at times, a curious irresponsibility that harmonises oddly with her direct intensity of movement. It allies her, by some subterranean process of thought, with the flitting, restless, inconsequent Nora. Her nature, like Nora's, apart from its symbol is inconsistent and incomprehensible. Lighted by it, as it is

in every moment of the play from beginning to end, it stands out, simple, clear-cut, and comprehensible.

No two plays of Ibsen have been more discussed as to their meaning than *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House*. Their obscurity lies, not in the depth of thought involved, but in the apparently perplexing character of the two women with whom they deal. Nora Helmer, as a light-headed daring, irresponsible, self-sacrificing, immoral, devoted wife, holds the interest but eludes the understanding. The same woman, lighted by the flare of the tarantelle, is comprehensible to the minutest shade of character. Hedda Gabler, the cold, straight, shining, passionless, explosive woman, fascinates the imagination, but does not satisfy it. Flashed upon by the symbol

of the play, she becomes a living soul.

When the scene opens upon Tesman and Aunt Julie, who has assisted in planning and making ready the house for Hedda, it at once becomes evident that Hedda has had no voice in the arrangement. Everything has been prepared for her as absolutely as a case for its jewel. She is to occupy it, to fill it.

TESMAN. (Embraces her.) Oh, yes, yes, Aunt Julie! Hedda—she is the loveliest part of it all! (Looks toward the doorway.) I think she 's coming now—eh?

(Hedda approaches from the left through the back room. She is a lady of twenty-nine. Face and figure dignified and distinguished. The color of the skin uniformly pallid. The eyes steel-grey, with a cold, open expression of serenity. The hair an agreeable brown of medium tint, but not very thick.)

From the moment of her entrance

her indifference is clear. She moves about the room with irresponsible touches, complains of the excess of light and looks on with relief while her husband draws the curtain across the windows, shutting out the sun. She has but two interests in life: negatively, that she shall not be bored; and positively, that something exciting may occur. As the play progresses, two relations in her past life are revealed—one with Judge Brack, a man of the world, and one with Ejlert Lövborg, a poet. She had parted from Lövborg holding a pistol to his head and threatening him. But he still attracts and interests her. Judge Brack she no longer cares for. She is, however, watchful of him. He alone of the men she comes in contact with understands her, knows how to handle her. The

poet, when he comes upon the scene, is drawn to her. Her student husband is puzzled by her. All three men are alike fascinated. The women of the play, Mrs. Elvsted and Aunt Julie, are also fascinated, but with a shrinking fascination. Mrs. Elvsted—a former schoolmate of Hedda's, now Lövborg's helper and his inspiration in his work—draws back from her even while she is helplessly attracted.

HEDDA. But to me, dear——! Goodness, we went to the same school together.

MRS. ELVSTED. Yes, but you were in the class above me! Oh, how fearfully afraid of you I was then!

HEDDA. Were you afraid of me?

MRS. ELVSTED. Yes, fearfully afraid. Because when we met on the stairs you always used to pull my hair.

HEDDA. No—did I really?

MRS. ELVSTED. Yes, and once you said you would scorch it off my head.

HEDDA. Oh, that was only nonsense, you know.

Throughout the scene the woman is in her power, yielding her secret inch by inch.

HEDDA. (Leans on the arm of the chair.) Thea—poor, sweet Thea!—now you must tell me everything,—just as it is.

MRS. ELVSTED. Well, then you must ask me questions.

Hedda puts them to her, as at the point of a pistol—short, sharp, searching. Nothing can escape her. With the men she does not intimidate. She fascinates.

The sheer art of the play lies, perhaps, in the fact that she is as fascinating to us as she is to the people of her own world. We do not pity her, nor

love her, nor scorn her. She fascinates. One follows her cool, quiet, unprophetic movements with breathless interest. The explosion comes and sets the nerves a-tingle and the wits to work. Why has she done this? What will she do next? There is no *why*, no calculable *what*. The spark touches the powder and it explodes. It is easy to understand her now—a pistol, deadly, simple, passionless, and straight. But she still fascinates—like a dangerous thing come upon unawares, on the library table in a quiet home. One picks it up, examines it gingerly, peers into the barrel, lifts the trigger a hair, lays it down softly, and goes away. But he never forgets that it is there—lying behind his back, silent and straight and deadly. He comes back to it again.

Hedda bears re-reading.

One may, or may not, resent Ibsen's method. He may be interested, or amused, at the idea of presenting the heroine of a play as a pistol, or he may characterise it as inartistic and absurd. But, once suggested, he can not escape the conviction that this is what Ibsen has done and what he deliberately intended to do. The whole play centres about Hedda, about her movements,—past, present, and to come; and it is only when she is recognised as a human pistol walking about the stage that these movements become explicable.

The first description reveals the conception: "The color of the skin uniformly pallid. The eyes steel-grey, with a cold, open expression of serenity." The action carries out the conception. She is born of a soldier,

cares nothing for ordinary interests. But if worst comes to worst—

HEDDA. One thing I have to amuse myself with meanwhile.

TESMAN. (Beaming with joy.) Oh! God be praised and thanked for that! And what may that be, Hedda—eh?

HEDDA. (At the doorway, looks at him with suppressed scorn.) My pistols, George.

TESMAN. (In an agony.) The pistols!

HEDDA. (With cold eyes.) General Gabler's pistols. (She goes through the back room out to the left.)

TESMAN. (Runs to the door and shouts after her.) No, for goodness' sake, dearest Hedda, don't touch the dangerous things! For my sake, Hedda—eh?

In the scene between Brack, Tesman, and Hedda, when they discuss the probability of Tesman's election to the professorship:

TESMAN. No, but Judge Brack—that

would show the most incredible want of consideration for me! (Gesticulating.) Yes, for consider, I am a married man! We married on my prospects, Hedda and I. Gone off and spent a lot of money. Borrowed money from Aunt Julie too. For, good Lord! I had as good as a promise of the appointment—eh?

BRACK. Well, well, well! You will get the appointment all the same. But there will be a contest first.

HEDDA. (Motionless in the arm-chair.) Think, Tesman, it will be almost like a kind of game.

TESMAN. But, dearest Hedda, how can you sit there and be so calm about it?

HEDDA. (As before.) I am not doing so at all. I am perfectly excited about it.

The reader, the spectator, feels the excitement underneath. At any moment, at a touch, she may explode, and the event that sets her off is apparently no more important, no more

irritating than hundreds that have preceded it. She is incalculable, mysterious, deadly. Yet there seems to be no intent in her death-dealing power. She fires into the air, at random, to kill time,—out of the open window.

BRACK. (Still outside.) Don't play such silly tricks!

HEDDA. Then come in, Judge.

(Judge Brack, in morning dress, comes in through the glass door. He carries a light overcoat on his arm.)

BRACK. What the devil are you doing with that revolver? What are you shooting?

HEDDA. Oh, I was only standing and shooting up into the blue sky.

BRACK. (Takes the pistol gently out of her hand.) Allow me, Mrs. Tesman. (Looks at it.) Ah! I know this well. (Looks around.) Where is the case? Ah, yes! (Puts the pistol into it and closes it.) For we are not

going to have any more of that tomfoolery to-day.

HEDDA. Well, what in the name of goodness would you have me do to amuse myself?

She never plans, never schemes, but woe to the thing that comes in her range, whether Lövborg or Lövborg's manuscript! Both are doomed. She will annihilate him, body and soul.

She longs for nothing so much as courage, physical courage, to pit herself and her power against, courage that will face and defy her and meet the moment without shrinking. She has seen only cowardice in men. They have paled before her, shrunk from danger. She seeks a man who will defy her and whom, in his defiance, she will destroy—a foe worthy of her mettle. The poet is the only man who has faced her with courage in his heart.

She remembers it with longing. It is the only thing that can win her admiration, subdue her. The man of the world can handle her, coerce her. But the poet has faced her down with courage. He, with his passionate heart, is the only one capable of appealing to her explosive nature; and even he fascinates her only that she may destroy him. She cares nothing for him physically or spiritually—only to cast her spell over him, and annihilate him.

He attracts her, in spite of herself, but he is not bold enough, vital enough, tempestuous. He will not dare. She wants him to confront her, to sweep her off her feet with excitement. She could understand that. She spurs him on to drink, she dares him. He shall come back to her with "vine leaves in his hair." To Lövborg and to Thea they

are the crown of the poet; but to Hedda they are Bacchus, the wild revel, and daring. Then, when he has "the courage of life, the defiance of life," he will need *her*.

MRS. ELVSTED. There is something mysterious about you, Hedda.

HEDDA. Yes, there is. I wish for once in my life to have power over the fate of a human being.

MRS. ELVSTED. Have you not got that?

HEDDA. Have n't—and never had.

MRS. ELVSTED. But not over your husband?

HEDDA. Oh, that would be worth taking a lot of trouble about! Oh, if you could only know how poor I am! And you are allowed to be so rich. (Throws her arms passionately around her.) I believe I shall scorch your hair off, after all.

MRS. ELVSTED. Let me go! Let me go! I am afraid of you, Hedda.

At the supreme moment of the play she has her wish.

LÖVBORG. Good-bye, Mrs. Tesman. And give a message to George Tesman for me—from me.

HEDDA. No, wait! You shall take a keepsake from me.

(She goes to the writing-table and opens the drawer and pistol case. Comes back to Lövborg with one of the pistols.)

LÖVBORG. (Looking at her.) This—is *this* the keepsake?

HEDDA. (Nods slowly.) Do you recollect it? It was aimed at you once.

LÖVBORG. You should have used it then.

HEDDA. Look here! *You* use it now.

LÖVBORG. (Puts the pistol into his breast pocket.) Thanks.

HEDDA. And do it beautifully, Ejlert Lövborg. Only promise me that!

LÖVBORG. Good-bye, Hedda Gabler.

(He goes out through the hall door. Hedda listens awhile at the door. She then goes to

the writing-table and takes out the packet with the manuscript, peeps into the envelope, pulls one or two of the leaves half out and glances at them. She then takes the whole of it and sits down in the arm-chair by the stove. She holds the packet in her lap. After a pause she opens the door of the stove, and then the packet also.)

HEDDA. (Throws one of the sheets into the fire and whispers to herself.) Now I am burning your child, Thea! You, with your curly hair! (Throws several sheets into the fire.) Your child and Ejlert Lövborg's child. (Throws the rest in.) Now I am burning—am burning the child.

It is significant that she does not tear the manuscript. There is no rage, no rejoicing, no passionate emotion in the scene. She burns it, leaf by leaf, in the fire. But there is no heat—only cold, explosive intensity,

Side by side with Hedda Gabler in

the portrayal of her destruction of Ejlert Lövborg, are Thea—the spiritual woman, the goddess, who strives to win him to his best self—and, more casually, Diana, the woman who would degrade him and in whose boudoir he is at last found dead with Hedda Gabler's pistol in his pocket.

The inner meaning of the play, the symbol within the symbol, indicated by these three women and their appeal to the poet, must be left for a later chapter, as must also the details of the symbol, the double symbolism of the play, and the question as to the artistic value of a play that can only be spiritually understood when it is perceived, through the mechanical structure of the play, that the chief character is not a mere woman, but a slim, straight, shining, deadly weapon.

IV

RELATION OF SYMBOLISM TO THE READER OR SPECTATOR

A DISTINGUISHED man of letters remarked after seeing "Ghosts" that it made all other art seem dead. The average audience leaves the theatre under the impression that it has been looking on at life itself. The lesson of the play, its structure, the artist behind it, are nothing. The vision is filled with Oswald, sin-consumed, motionless, in the sunny room, demanding with dull, toneless voice, "The sun—the sun."

There may be a lesson behind it—

the sins of the fathers. But the lesson is not what the audience cares for—at present. There may be art—it is a minor thing. The vividness of the play, the reality, the horror, are what stir one, and linger. If proof of Ibsen's greatness were needed, it would be found in the fact that one need not understand a single stroke of the intricate art of the play to be moved by its power. Oswald, with the steady, consuming fire eating into his life, and his mother fluttering helplessly near, are realities. They move us, as all great art moves, by being more real than reality itself. No one thinks of the symbol; its existence is scarcely guessed; it reveals the thing it stands for without obtruding itself. Yet, from almost the first lines to the climax, where it flames against the night sky,

in ruins, the Orphanage stands for Oswald. Built as a monument to Captain Alving's memory, to expiate the evil he has done, it is doomed from the start. Nothing with the taint of his memory on it can endure. "It will burn," says Oswald, "like the other. Everything will burn. There won't remain a single thing in memory of my father. Here am I, too, burning down."

The test of a symbol lies in its revealing power. It is introduced to reveal character or soul-action, and its power to do this is its justification. The reader, or the spectator, may not guess its existence. But he will be moved by it. He feels what he cannot understand or see. Later, when the symbol is perceived, it clarifies the vision. One does not have to know the symbol of the pistol to be fascinated

by Hedda Gabler. He does have to know it to understand her. It is the attempt to explain Hedda without understanding her that has led to criticism more conscientious than enlightening. A certain anxious woman remarked after seeing Miss O'Neil's interpretation of Hedda, that she *thought* she understood what Ibsen meant, in every place but one. She was not *quite* sure what he meant when he made Hedda tell Lövborg so and so. "It did not seem consistent." As if poor Hedda were ever consistent—except in her explosions and her dread of ennui and of scandal. That Hedda Gabler has other meaning than a pistol, or Nora than a tarantelle, is obvious. But one is not likely to come upon this meaning until the symbol is flashed upon it. Then it becomes sim-

ple—incongruities fall away, related parts slide into place, and the meaning of the whole stands out clarified and vivid. This is the office of symbol. If it does this without obtruding itself, it has, doubtless, vindicated its right to be. That it is complex, intricate minute, does not necessarily mean that it is artificial. The branchings of life are microscopic. One may construct a cunningly wrought flower that shall lack only perfume, or he may drop into the rich soil of his imagination a tiny seed that shall push its pair of leaves above the ground to expand in leaf and blossom. "The Lady from the Sea" is not an ingenious conception, but a beautiful growth of the under-sea —its long tentacles beckoning and floating, appearing and disappearing, eluding always the understanding, but

stirring the imagination till it looks, with clear eyes, into the depths, sees there what Ibsen saw, and delights in it with him.

For Ibsen is only doing in the drama what the most modern of musicians has done in another art. When in the Rheingold-prelude to the *Niebelungen Ring* the Walhalla motive sounds its deep, beautiful challenge and the sympathetic listener sees the Walhalla towers rise through shadowy distance, and rock at last to their downfall, his soul sings within him. The prelude for him, is full, of beautiful pictures, mysterious meanings, too subtle to put into words, fading almost before they are born, emerging from the motives, rising and falling in swift enriching waves, reaching to the farthest bound of space.

The listener who knows nothing of motive or structure or plan is moved by the music. But he does not know what it is that has happened to him. He sees no visions. He hears no voices calling. The Wotan motive, with its stern, down-reaching strength, touches him and he responds. It breaks across the rippling music of the Rhine Daughters bringing its portent of tragedy—Wotan—Father of Gods—Rhine maidens—guarded gold and curse—Loki—Fire-charm—the Sword—Siegfried—the call of birds, and at last, again, the Walhalla motive—grand and triumphant and mysteriously sad . . . . They do with him what they will. He is a child in the hands of a master.

But to the musician the motives bring a deeper joy. His soul rises to

stand beside that of the master overlooking the world.

Of Wagner's music-dramas, Mr. H. T. Finck writes:

They can indeed be enjoyed in a *passive* sort of way without paying any special attention to the Leading Motives, which, even in that case make an impression by their musical beauty, emotional realism, and unconscious association of ideas; but he who would experience all the delights these artworks are capable of giving must bring his *active* attention to bear on the recurrence and ramification of the Leading Motives; then will he participate in the joys which Wagner must have felt when, in the white heat of inspiration, he gave them their subtle significance.

V

IBSEN'S SYMBOLISM DEFINED

THE decade from 1867 to 1877 marks a dead centre in Ibsen's work. Except for the "Emperor and Galilean," which was the mere elaboration of a sketch made in Rome some years before, and which bears no relation, either in content or in interest, to the time in which it was written—except for this play he produced no art-work from the writing of "The Young Men's League," begun in 1868, to the presentation of "Pillars of Society" in 1877. Up to this period he had produced, from the time he

was twenty years old, an almost regular succession of dramatic works of highly romantic character; after this period, from 1877 to 1899, he produced every other year a play of the most realistic nature—each play belonging to the same order, and the whole differing in every regard from the work of his earlier period. They make in all a dozen plays that may prove to be the most significant work, artistically, of the nineteenth century. Certainly the nineteenth century has no parallel to offer to the change of ideal that they mark. At the age of fifty, after thirty years of writing and thinking, Ibsen began his lifework anew. Tolstoi, it is true, changed from artist to reformer in his old age, and Wagner, after middle life, composed *Parsifal* and the *Nie-*

belungen Ring, the greatest operas of musical history; but Tolstoi only struck, in each successive work, a little more loudly the note of the reformer, a little less clearly the note of the artist, till the voice of the artist was lost; and Wagner but brought to perfection in Parsifal the motives that shaped the Flying Dutchman and Tannhäuser and Lohengrin. Neither Tolstoi nor Wagner changed his ideal.

But Ibsen faced squarely about. He forswore the gods of his youth and waited ten years for the dawning of a new hierarchy. He had worked twenty years, now he waited ten, and again he wrought twenty. That is the sum of his life-work, fitting itself, approximately, into decades for the pleasure of the curious. The work of the first twenty years is of the most

ultra-romantic character. All literature would have to be searched to find a companion piece for *Peer Gynt* in its romantic emphasis. The plays of this earlier period—which are romantic and poetic and highly artistic—deal, for the most part, with the past. The plays of the second period—which are realistic and written in prose—deal entirely with the present. Thus a change of artistic ideal that is generally accomplished only by generations has taken place in the life and soul of one man. Ibsen's realistic work is even more perfect and finished than his romantic. It is as if, when a young man, he had engaged in literature through mere overflow of spirit, a kind of Viking energy that must expend itself—in historical romance, in Norse fancy, in finished phrase, and

hurried, tumbling rhymes and lines—work so spontaneous and intricate and finished that it has taxed translators to the utmost to give a conception of its free, bubbling nature and exact perfection of form. Then there came a pause. The man seems to have stayed his hand, considering—"Why should I fashion these romantic trifles, playthings of art? The men and women of my own time, society, life as it is,—these are what fascinate the mind and elude it." He planned a new play, *The Young Men's League.* It should be in prose, and it should treat of Norwegian society of the present day. He sets forth his ideal in a letter written to Mr. Edmund Gosse:

There is one point which I must discuss with you. You think my new drama ought to be written in verse, and that it will gain

an advantage if it is. Here I must simply contradict you; for the piece is, as you will find, developed in the most realistic way possible. The illusion I wish to produce is that of truth itself; I want to produce upon the reader the impression that what he is reading is actually taking place before him. If I were to use verse, I should by so doing be stultifying my own intention and the object which I placed before me. The variety of every-day and unimportant characters which I have intentionally introduced into the piece would be effaced and blended into one another if I had allowed them all to converse in a rhythmic movement. . . . —My new drama is not indeed a tragedy in the old-world signification of the word, but what I have tried to depict in it is human beings, and for that very reason I have not allowed them to talk the language of the gods!

The Young Men's League has, in itself, no interest. It is prosaic, hard,

and unconvincing. Biographically it has the greatest interest. In it Ibsen had tried and failed. Then he waited. Ten years earlier he had made a similar attempt at prose form in *Love's Comedy*, a satiric drama treating of modern society. Failing to satisfy himself—failing in realism—that is, he had turned the whole bodily into verse, sometimes line for line and sometimes with free hand. He had recognised that prose is the form suited to treatment of modern life, and prose he could not handle; therefore he returned to verse. But now, ten years later, a change had come over him. He would not return to the old form and he could not go on. Therefore he waited.

He was intensely interested in the life and problems of his own time.

They fascinated and eluded him. He must treat these, or nothing. But he was, first and foremost, an artist —more artist than reformer. He would never write a second *Young Men's League*.

Slowly, it may be, out of the years of waiting, or in a flash, the secret of his later art form came to him. Surrounded in his Dresden retreat by the noblest art-work of the past, and by the *Music of the Future*, with its richness of harmony and melody and dramatic motive, he groped his way to a new dramatic form such as no playwright had ever dreamed. Art-form he must have. He would write of the people of his own time; therefore he must write in prose. And prose as a dramatic art-form was unknown. He must hew it out of the rock of his

own being. In 1877 he produced *Pillars of Society*. His form was found. He has never varied from it. He has only perfected and developed it.

The new form was symbolism.

Literature, as the record of universal experience, has gradually acquired certain symbols that have become conventionalised—a kind of stage property of poets and artists and common people. The lily is a symbol of purity, the eagle of strength, red of passion, and gray of peace. These are symbols that carry their meaning in the mere naming of them. They serve their use most perfectly when the symbolic quality is most revealed. Rossetti's work is full of conventional symbolism—mystery and charm and unreality. We walk among his poems as in a garden where perfume and

shape and colour haunt the senses with curious, hidden meaning. One may not pluck a flower, or touch it, lest the dream be broken.

Of this conventional symbolism Ibsen's work has no trace. His work gives, first and foremost, a sense of intense reality—of actuality even. It is not till later that a hidden intent is guessed, and when this intention is traced to its source, the symbols discovered are original. Each of them—the pistol, the tarantelle, the wild duck, the white horses, the rotten ship—reveals perfectly that for which it stands. They originate in Ibsen's imagination, and serve his purpose because they are the concrete images of his thought.

The symbolism of character—if it may be so called—in which a character stands for a universal type,—Othello

for jealousy and Macbeth for ambition —is found in the work of Ibsen's earlier period. In his first play, *Catilina*, for example, the two women, Aurelia and Furia, embody two abstract principles in the life of Catiline, one drawing out all that is tender and gentle, the other inciting him to wild deeds. Jaeger calls attention to them as prototypes of Ibsen's later women. Symbolism of this more obvious character will be found both in Ibsen's earlier and later plays, as in all dramatic work. But symbolism of this sort, if it may be called symbolism at all, differs from the conventional order in that it attains its highest excellence when the symbolic quality is submerged and the reality appears to occupy the stage alone. Othello is not embodied jealousy, but a

jealous man; Rita Allmers is not the embodiment of physical beauty and wealth, but a living woman who charms the senses.

It is not, however, types of this sort that are referred to when Ibsen's symbols are mentioned, but, as I have tried to point out in *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, symbols that stand, first, for a character of the play; and second, as has not yet been shown, for the meaning of the play as a whole. An object or event is used as a central theme or motive of the play. Toward this symbol the ostensible action of the play moves, and from it, it recedes. This object or event—as the tarantelle—also stands for the character of the play, whose soul is the stage of the real action of the play; and thus the

symbol stands, at last, for the play itself.

It was the discovery of this artistic device that enabled Ibsen to go on with the prose drama. "On the whole," he had written earlier to Mr. Gosse, "my feeling is that literary form ought to be in relation to the amount of ideality which is spread over the representation." This he had at last achieved. His prose dramas preserve the sense of reality. They "produce upon the reader the impression that what he is reading is actually taking place before him." But they convey at the same time a sense of art, of removal, a picture set in its frame, a touch of the higher reality that is called truth, a meaning underlying and refining the whole. This sense of art is produced by the

use of symbol. It reserves itself, is not puffed up, thinketh not of itself more highly than it ought; but all the time it is there, constant, pervasive, convincing—persuading the spectator that that which he looks upon is life itself and that, more than life, it is truth.

VI

CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IBSEN'S USE OF SYMBOL

THE first use of symbolism, in *Pillars of Society*, reveals it as a perfect intellectual conception. Ibsen had not put pen to paper till the whole was clear before him. The *Indian Girl*, the rotten, unseaworthy vessel, patched up between trips, endangering the life and property entrusted to her, is Bernick, the councillor, owner of the *Indian Girl*, the man to whom are intrusted the interests and well-being of his fellow-citizens,

and in whose keeping they are as safe as the ventures entrusted to the rotten ship. Intellectually the conception fails at no point. The symbol is clearly conceived and it is so woven into the structure of the play that the two cannot be separated. But the result is not satisfying. The play convinces the intellect, but not the soul. It lacks atmosphere, vitality, inevitableness. It is not convincing. It does not grip the imagination.

In the next play, *A Doll's House*, Ibsen has met this difficulty. The play is life itself. It has its symbol and it lays hold on the sympathy of the reader. But again it fails of artistic completeness. The symbol does not fit at all points. It is more loosely wrought into the whole than in *Pillars of Society*. It does, however, give

atmosphere. *A Doll's House* is full of flitting unrest and weighted with a heavier meaning. This is its note, its tone. *Pillars of Society* has no tone. It is cold—intellectually correct, but without atmosphere. It lacks color.

It is in *Ghosts* that Ibsen must, at last, have felt that he had more nearly satisfied his ideal. It is a tainted play. One shrinks from it as from something unclean. Yet it burns, etches itself in, as does no other of Ibsen's plays. It is probably remembered as is no other—a play of loathing. The hospital, closely inwoven with the tragedy of Oswald's soul—or body, should one say?—is unclean from the start. Captain Alving's memory is upon it. The play fits closely in every point. Oswald and the hospital are

both "on the Captain Alving foundation;" Parson Manders, with his blundering, short-sighted, pious advice, is responsible for the existence of both; in both, Mrs. Alving strives to whiten her husband's memory; neither, alas, is insured; and both burn—the hospital flaring on its hill at midnight, only the foundations smouldering till the dawn, and Oswald burning, a gray, pale ghost, in the light of the rising sun. The play does not lack vision or atmosphere. One who has seen *Ghosts* has seen symbolism perfectly conceived and executed. The subject may be loathsome, but the art is very nearly perfect.

An Enemy of the People, Ibsen's response to the storm of opposition roused by *Ghosts*, is polemical and bears the marks of strife. Society is

poisoned at the source, Ibsen has tried to point out the evil and he is met by a storm of abuse. Dr. Stockmann discovers the impurity of the baths, on which the life of the town depends, he points it out, and is stoned and hooted at, and driven from his home. The symbol holds throughout, but it is not, artistically, as perfect as in *Ghosts*. Ibsen has forgotten his art, for the moment, to defend himself, and the art suffers.

In "The Wild Duck" he has regained his serenity. Once more he stands away from his subject and sees it, detached, in the clear light of art. People are no longer antagonists, stoning the would-be reformer. Society is a helpless thing, wounded by tradition, sickened under convention; with clipped wings it passes its days in a

strange, dim loft, with only a glimpse of the blue sky or the free air of heaven. The wild duck is a symbol of the Ekdal family, and, through them, of humanity—wounded and imprisoned in its net of fate. The mechanism, in this play, has become more intricate and perfect. The bird stands not for one person, but for three—grandfather, father, and child—and in each a new note is struck. The atmosphere of fantastic unreality that plays about the realism in this drama could, perhaps, have been given in no other way as it is given by the wild duck—confined in the dingy loft, with its stale Christmas trees and tub of water, and, in the background, rabbits and pigeons moving vaguely. The play has been more sharply criticised than any other of Ibsen's. One prominent and fair-

minded reviewer said that it is best characterised by its own adjective, and that no sane person could read it to the end. It has been criticised chiefly for its fantastic quality and for its unreality—the two effects for which the artist was striving!

It is one of the ironies of art that Ibsen's plays, which, more than those of any other dramatist, are written for the stage, should thus far have been more read than acted. They are not for the closet. The acting is almost indispensable to their understanding. The action is static, not progressive, and is better seen than narrated. The mere turning of leaves separates important things that on the stage flash together, revealing the whole. In *The Wild Duck*, for instance:

(Ekdal and Hjalmar have gone up the

stage. Each is pushing aside one-half the sliding door. . . . Through the opening of the door is seen a large irregular loft with odd nooks and corners, and a few stove-pipes here and there. There are skylights, through which bright moonlight falls upon certain parts of the great room. Others are in darkness.)

After a little Hjalmar and Hedvig close the doors. But the spectator still feels the big, uncanny room behind the closed doors. The next morning they are opened again.

(The morning sun is shining in through the skylights, many pigeons are flying hither and thither, others are perched cooing on rafters; the hens cackle now and again, at the further end of the loft.)

The doors remain open through the scene that follows. The most ordinary spectator will find his imagination taken hold on by the weird,

phantasmal upperloft that seems to open like an inner meaning within the play itself. He may not recognise consciously that the wild duck, crouching on her nest in the background, is a symbol of the helpless Ekdal family —of the grandfather, pottering about and tending on her, of Hjalmar with his romantic ideals, and of little Hedvig herself, nearly blind, whose weakened eyes cannot bear the light of the sun. But the symbol, crouching there, will take hold on his imagination, will grip it close. He will feel the meaning that he could not put into words. On the ordinary *reader*, turning page after page in half-impatient haste, the symbolism will be lost, not only intellectually, which is of least moment, but in the color and tone of impression. *The Wild Duck*, re-

veals more clearly than any previous play the very intimate relation of the symbol to the play. "Symbolism," writes M. Emile Faguet, may be an ornament, an additional interpreter of the author's thought; and an ornament is never superfluous if it is fair and well-chosen. . . . Symbolic drama is one in which a symbol is introduced occasionally, by way of explanation, or commentary, or as an element of beauty." In Ibsen's symbolic drama the symbol is not introduced occasionally, nor is it an ornament. The very marrow of his meaning is in it. Remove the wild duck from the play—he could still have represented Ekdal and Hjalmar and Hedvig all devoted to some fantastic, futile ideal. But the bodying of that ideal in the actual wild duck gives

the play its atmosphere, and its air of unreality, such as no abstract ideal could give. It lights up the characters and their helpless degradation as nothing else could do. The wild duck in captivity is Ekdal and Hjalmar and Hedvig. Through it we see the plight of humanity. In other words, the play *is* the wild duck. It gives substance, form, and atmosphere. Remove it and the whole structure falls apart, the atmosphere takes to itself wings. We have left only an intellectual heap of bones.

In *Rosmersholm* the symbol stands not for a living character in the play, but for a dead woman. The white horses that haunt Rosmersholm are the power of Beate, the dead woman, superstition—struggling with Rebecca, the woman of new thought, for

Rosmer's soul. Beate, now that she is dead and of the past, holds her husband with fatal grasp. It is a shadowy, spectral play, with haunting, mystic touches, tracks of the white horses that follow, follow always—till they, too, Rebecca and Rosmer are swept over the flowing dam and Beate's memory is appeased. The white horses ride no more. By voluntary sacrifice has the debt to the past been wiped out.

The Lady from the Sea, which is perhaps the most beautiful of Ibsen's plays, as *Ghosts* is the most powerful, seems to mark a turn in Ibsen's thought. From this time on, the individual becomes his hope. It is a play full of the opalescent colour and free tide of the sea. One can well believe that Ibsen while writing it "would

stand for hours on the landing-pier, gazing down into the depths or up at the distance." The depths and the distance are both in it.

It is the first play in which the problem of the soul, as distinct from that of society, is presented. Ibsen seems to have said: "Society is poisoned at its source. It will not be saved by me; I am 'An Enemy of the People.' Neither can it save itself. Only through the power of the free soul, acting freely, can help come. The Lady from the Sea is the soul—humanity—imprisoned by convention. The symbol is the open sea, the Stranger, that is calling to her, always, to leave the stifling inland fyord and return to the free life of the open sea." The play will be taken up again in connection with the more intimate relations of the symbol.

Both for its beauty and for its meaning it is entitled to close study.

The hard, metallic lustre of *Hedda Gabler* is in strange contrast with the soft iridescence of *The Lady from the Sea*. One hardly knows which of these two plays to name as the most perfect example of Ibsen's art. In each the plot is compact and plain, the symbol close, and the atmosphere in keeping with plot and character and meaning. The symbol of *Hedda Gabler*—in spite of the fact that Mr. Payne mentions it as a play having only the merest traces of symbolism—is clean-cut and vivid. One's admiration at the skill with which it is used to heighten effects is increased by the fact that in this play, for the first time, Ibsen introduces a definite accompanying symbol which plays and

interplays with that of the pistol; namely, the manuscript, which is used throughout as the symbol of the soul of the poet. It is this which Hedda destroys at the climax scene, even before Lövborg's body yields to her destructive power. And it is over the manuscript that Tesman, the man of letters, and Thea, Lövborg's good angel, are at work, in the last scene, trying to piece together, from scattered notes, something that may be saved to the world, when the sound of Hedda's pistol breaks the silence.

Hedda Gabler, moreover, is the first play in which other characters than the main one stand out as unmistakable symbols. Hedda, that is, as the main character of the play has her symbol, the pistol; and she in turn is a symbol—if it may be so called.

She is not merely a woman, but a type —the cold, destructive woman of intellectual power who kills the soul of the poet. And side by side with her are other types—Thea, the goddess woman, the poet's good angel who would inspire him and save him to the world; and Diana, the huntress, who pursues him and degrades him through his lower nature. Beside them are the two masculine types, the man of the world, Judge Brack, and the mere student, Tesman, who, too, play their part in the tragedy of the poet's soul. There have been hints of the use of characters, other than the main one, as types or symbols in former plays. Gregers, the reformer, the dog who plunges to save the wild duck, and Dr. Relling, who schemes only to make its captivity bearable, are types of this

order, as is also Rebecca, the new woman, of free thought and action, in *Rosmersholm*. But in *Hedda Gabler*, for the first time, the whole cast has been blocked in types. It becomes thus one of the most condensed and powerful of Ibsen's plays; and this condensation, this effect of stored-up energy, adds much to the hard brilliancy that characterises the play.

The two notes struck in *Rosmersholm*—first, that the real problem of society is that of the struggle between the old order and the new, and second, that woman is to play an important and inevitable part in this struggle—are again sounded in the *Master Builder Solness*. In Hedda there was a hint of woman's relation to the vital problem of society. But it is not till *The Master Builder*

that the two notes sound out together, clear and unmistakable.

Solness is of the old order. He is deeply jealous of the new, which he hinders and thrusts back at every point. He is not only jealous of the new, but he is distrustful of himself—almost to the point of insanity. His symbol is the climbing of a high steeple to place upon it the builder's wreath. This he did, years ago, when he himself was of the new order. Courage then was in his heart. Is it there now? He has taken no risks for years. He builds only comfortable homes, domestic villas. He puts on a tower—when the owners will let him—but he himself never climbs to the top to place upon it the crowning wreath. He is beset by a conviction of his inherent failure and by fear of the new generation.

It will crowd him out—as he has crowded out old Brovik, the broken-down architect to whom he is heartlessly cruel. He *can* not be otherwise. He *dare* not. Then into his life courage comes once more, and daring. Hilda Wangel, the "little Hilda" whom he had loved the day that he climbed so high and who had loved him, comes to claim him. He has made to her a promise. Under her inspiration it comes back to him—"all that he had meant to be and failed in the making." Once more he will be strong. He will carry the wreath to the top of the new house that he has built—to the highest point of the tower. He climbs it amid the wonder of the crowd—the new generation looking on, incredulous. He places the wreath on the topmost point. . . . When they pick him up

he is dead. "My—my Master Builder," Hilda calls him. He has been hers, once more, and has dared. But he was not strong enough to obey her will. The new generation, only, can climb and dare. But woman gives, always, her admiration to the old order. She incites it to repeat the brave deeds of its youth, and when it fails, she still worships—"My—my Master Builder."

Ibsen has written two plays of the soul—of the soul, that is, as separate from modern society and its problems. In the first of these, *The Lady from the Sea*, the meaning of the play still centres about the relation of the soul to society, to social conventions. In the second, *Little Eyolf*, the soul is at last divorced from time and place—freed to itself and its essential problems. The characters are modern,

and the setting; but that is a detail. Little Eyolf is a drama of the soul. It is the *Pilgrim's Progress*, of modern life. In it the soul passes from careless childhood and the life of the spirit, through the temptation of the senses, through remorse and failure, out, at last, into the freer, fuller life of humanity. At first, to the boy and youth, the soul is the accompaniment of living. The body is subordinate to it. In the man the body gains sway and draws him away from the soul. Out of this Eyolf is born, crippled and helpless; and, through Eyolf, is born remorse. Then at last comes the true man, no longer concerned for the body nor even for his own soul, but working gladly for humanity. The universal love is born.

Of *Little Eyolf* Mr. Payne says

that "even the most persistent of searchers for symbols may possibly be content to take this play for what it is and see in it nothing more than a direct transcript of life under ideal conditions arranged by a consummate artistic sense." One may be more than content to take it as a direct transcript of life under ideal conditions arranged by a consummate artistic sense. But he will presently find that the consummate artistic sense of the writer of *Little Eyolf* has led him to employ for the rendering of its "sadness and sweetness" the most complex and delicate piece of symbolism his work has known. Little Eyolf, with his crutch and his open, haunting eyes, is the symbol of his father's broken life. He is at once the maimed soul and the remorse that fills it. There is thus a

subtle crossing of symbolism in the play. Eyolf seems now the crippled soul and now the remorse that follows Allmers as the rats follow the Ratwife. He is both, and the symbols cross and interplay in him as they cross and interplay in the life of Allmers, who is haunted by remorse even before he is conscious of what it means. He has neglected his other "Little Eyolf," his soul's mate, and his soul is sick. But he does not know what it is that troubles him, that gnaws and gnaws and will not give him rest. The play may be called the tragedy of the soul and body. The body is "a creature of the earth," the soul is "akin to the sea and the heavens." The soul meets a body and becomes absorbed in it and in its delights, forgetting its higher needs, and Little Eyolf, the crippled

child, is born—and remorse. The soul longs to leave the body, to go back to its own, to the solitudes out of which it came; it longs for death. Then, of a sudden, it finds itself and returns, voluntarily, to take up the crippled life and remorse—willing to carry it always. The selfish, individual life, interested only in the problems of its own soul and body, must widen out into the universal life and love—perhaps through defeat and remorse. Soul and body can join in making peace with the haunting eyes.

John Gabriel Borkman is the play in which double symbolism—a symbol that looks toward the past and one that looks toward the future—is first used clearly and fully. We have hints of this form in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* and in *Hedda Gabler*. But not till

John Gabriel Borkman, the last play of the series, do we find it used in perfection. It is a play of Shadows and Dead Folk. The inevitable escape of the new life from the past finds its climax and its symbol in the elopement of Erhart Borkman from the fluttering shadows of his home. In this play Ibsen returns once more to the struggle between the old order and the new. It is his final word. The old cannot hold the new. It believes in itself—Borkman, the sick wolf, pacing his upper room, gloats over his successes of the past and longs only to renew them in the life of his son; Mrs. Borkman, sitting below, hard and cold, broods over her injuries and plans how they shall be avenged by that same son; while Ella Rentheim, the sick, half-dead woman, is striving to lay hands on the youth,

to carry him away from this stern, bleak house, and place him in a sunnier home where he may carry out the ideals of the past—*her* ideals of love and sympathy. But he slips from them, each and all, and glides away on the sledge with silver bells. He "must live his own life." The symbol is closely inwoven with the plot. It is at once detailed and clear. The play is filled with shadows, but it has none of the perplexing interplay of *Little Eyolf*. The shadows are clear, not confused. They are a pale, grey company that reach out entreating, threatening, loving hands to the life that is slipping from them.

Ibsen is at heart an optimist. He could not close his life's work with a note of negation. *When We Dead Awaken* is a clear, ringing call to

the future. It is a play of hope in which he gathers up the threads of all preceding plays. Its importance as a part of his message will be seen later. It is the symbol of a past that has failed and a future that now, through free choice, shall be glorious—the life of the mountain heights–the life of the soul newborn. It is at once "Epilogue" and Prophecy. It takes the soul up into the mountains, high and higher, above the mists, whence shall be seen at last a new day. The ideal woman, waking at last from her long sleep, looks out upon the world with clear eyes. *The Day of Resurrection* takes us to the dawn. Beyond the dawn one may not look, even above the mists.

VII

RELATION OF SYMBOL TO PLOT

IBSEN'S plays have many of the attributes of Greek dramatic art. They deal with subjects of present interest to the audience for which they are written, as did the plays of the great dramatists. To a Greek audience of the time of Æschylus, the relation between men and gods was of vital interest. To an audience of the present day, the relation of men to men is of supreme importance. The social relation, which is becoming more and more emphasised in the minds of men, and which may be destined to be the next great subject for art, is the chief

subject of Ibsen's plays. Most of us are still in the thick of the fight. The moral aspects of the question, the ethical and altruistic and practical demands are too insistent for us to see it as a whole, or to see it clearly, as material for art—to see it as beautiful. The artist, who walks always a little ahead of his age, pointing out the beauty and meaning that might otherwise escape notice, sets up his flag-staff here and there to mark the way. He will perhaps have passed out of sight before his generation reaches the place where the flag is set. But they will find his message waiting them there, as all beautiful things wait their finding. Ibsen is the artist of our day who points the way. He, more than any other, has used for the basis of his art the vital interest of his age. In this he is Greek.

In unities of time and place, too, he meets the Greek ideal. In *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* the action of the whole play is confined to one room, and in none of the plays does it escape the small town in which it opens up. Each act of a play is invariably given in one scene. In *Ghosts* the action is limited to twenty-four hours, in *A Doll's House* to forty-eight, and in none is the usual time more than two or three days.

One who is accustomed to think of plot and action as synonymous must dissociate the two terms in taking up the work of Ibsen. His plays have plot in abundance, but nothing happens in them, any more than in one of Mr. Henry James' novels. The action takes place in the soul of a character or in

the relation between characters. There are few incidents—unless one regards the adventures of the soul as such. "It is an incident," maintains Mr. James, "for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident, I think it will be hard to say what it is." There are plenty of women in Ibsen's plays standing by tables and looking out at you in a certain way. But there is little that is understood by plot and action in the ordinary sense of the words. The interest of the plot is psychological, the action such as will develop it.

Off the stage, however, many things take place, or have already taken place when the play opens. Ibsen's plot begins where in the ordinary play it leaves off, just before the catastrophe.

If one takes for the representation of the ordinary play Freytag's cone,

in which the parts of the plot are present to the eye, (*a*) introduction, (*b*) rise, (*c*) climax, (*d*) return or fall, (*e*) catastrophe, and places beside it the plot of a play of Ibsen's, he will find that the part represented by *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d* has taken place before the curtain rises. The opening scene upon the stage is placed between *d* and *e* and very near to *e*. The interest of the play centres, not in the rise or climax or fall, but in the catastrophe. The Ibsen play may be called the play of catastrophe. In the Shakespearean play the interest practically ceases with the fall, since the catastrophe from that point on is foreseen and inevitable. But in Ibsen's play, a new interest

arises with the catastrophe: namely, the interest of soul. How will the soul conduct itself under test? In the Shakespearean play the hero has brought upon himself the calamity. It is the natural outcome of his action and the spectator watches the return and fall of the movement of the play with a certain sense of appeased justice. The catastrophe falls, but the hero himself has precipitated it. In the Greek drama and in Ibsen's the hero is, perhaps, not responsible for the evil that has befallen him. Through the misdoing of parents or society, or through overruling fate, the crisis is upon him. How will he meet it? What has the soul to show? The time is short. The action swift.

In apparent rapidity of action, Ibsen's plays have an advantage over the

Greek model. The part played by the chorus in the Greek play, that of narrating the events that have led up to the play and forecasting the future is taken in an Ibsen play by the main characters. The recounting of the past and the onward movement of the plot are simultaneous.

In *The Lady from the Sea*, for instance, the prior plot is gathered from the conversation of the characters as the plot upon the stage moves swiftly to its denouement. Ellida, the Lady from the Sea, had fallen in love with the mate of a vessel that had anchored at the light-house. She had been betrothed to him by a romantic ceremony —their two united rings thrown into the sea—and he had gone away leaving her in her light-house. After a few years she grows tired of waiting—perhaps for-

gets—and when Dr. Wangel, a widower from the mainland, asks her to marry him, she consents. She goes with him to his home on the mainland by the fiord, and is at first contented; but a little before her child is born she grows restless. She remembers vividly the Stranger. She is drawn toward him in her thoughts. When the child comes, and she sees that it has the Stranger's eyes, she grows frightened. The child lives only a few months. Through its life, and after, the Stranger haunts her. She cannot escape him. Meanwhile the Stranger, who has sailed to various ports, learns from a stray copy of a Norwegian paper of the Lady's marriage and swears a vow to go and claim her for his own. It is at the time that this vow is made that the Lady first remembers

him and feels his presence calling to her.

The situation, therefore, when the play opens is: the Lady strongly drawn to the Stranger, compelled to him in thought and longing, yet full of dread. She longs to go with him. Yet she must stay. She has no free choice in the matter. The Stranger is on his way to claim her. The Lady's husband and the other characters are ignorant of the situation. It concerns only the Lady. Her soul is the stage of action. The action is thus confined to narrow limits, and will cover only a short time.

The Stranger comes, claims her; she is given power of free choice, and voluntarily elects to abide by her life as it is. The action certainly is of the slightest. If there is plot, one must

look for it elsewhere than in the outer action.

One source of interest is the gradual unfolding of precedent plot. It is a series of pictures each picture suggesting some phase of early action *in its setting*. Compare this method with that of the Shakespearean play in which the early lines *narrate* what slight precedent action is given. In Ibsen's play we *see* the Lighthouse, the Betrothal, the Sea, the Stranger killing the captain, wandering over the face of the waters, entering foreign ports, in the cabin of the ship reading the Norwegian paper, that tells of the marriage of his betrothed. All these are not merely events narrated. They are scenes—all connected with the Sea, keeping its vastness constantly before our eyes, its sound in our ears, through-

out the play; and all the while the ostensible action is taking place on dry land, "by the lukewarm waters of the fiord." Thus the play, through the pictured representation of the action leading up to it, becomes a wide, free thing, with shining opalescent gleams and the breath of winds in it. Ellida becomes in truth the Lady from the Sea. Ibsen has accomplished in this play what Saint-Saens regards as "a miracle" in Wagner—in that "he succeeded, during the whole of the first act of 'The Flying Dutchman', in making us hear the sound of the Sea without interrupting the dramatic action."

Meanwhile, as the spectator gathers up the threads of the past story, he finds them centring toward one point —the soul of the Lady. Everything converges to that. Now, on this new

stage, the denouement is to come. Will they draw her again, these threads stretching from the sea? Or will she herself cut the knot that holds them and toss them to the winds of heaven? This is the real interest, the inmost kernel of the plot. It is a question that no one can answer—not Dr. Wangel anxious and uncertain about her, not the Stranger with his changing eyes and alluring charm, not Ellida herself, swayed to his presence as the tide to its moon, not even the reader, who sees as in a picture the Lady with her web of threads stretching far. Only the master, from beginning to end, knows the answer. He weaves his web with skilful hand, and when the pattern is complete before our eyes, in colour and beauty and design, we see that it could not have been otherwise

But up to that point, the interest holds—not interest of action, but the interest which must always attach to the spectacle of the human soul under challenge.

It is the real interest of all great dramatic work. Underneath the vicissitudes of events, one pierces to the soul upon which they play. How will it meet the test? What of Prometheus on his mighty rock, and Lear upon the storm-swept heath, and Faust in the sordid Rathskeller? The interest in dramatic action is Soul, and again Soul, and once more Soul. Things happen: winds blow, masts break—rain and hail and flood and the trampling of armies—but the real field of action is limited to a handful of grey matter, stuff that one could hold in his hand and scatter to the

winds. There, and there alone, have taken place the battles that have shaped the world. The soul, acting and reacting upon events, is the dramatic norm. In the Shakespearian drama we see the events, as they come and go, acting upon the soul and the soul reacting upon them. In Ibsen's plays the events are all of the past. It is now the turn of the soul. His plays—more than those of any other dramatist—focus attention upon the action of the soul. To this form of drama no artistic method could be so well suited as that of symbol. The action is not progressive, but static; and it is, thus, best revealed, not by events, but by pictures; that is, by symbols. The symbol touches the struggle at every point. By it the soul is revealed—in pictures.

Layer after layer it opens out; deeper and deeper the eye penetrates until the inmost heart of the matter is reached.

The Sea, the symbol of the play, is the Stranger. He is variable, fascinating; his eyes, still in sunshine or darkening in stormy weather, and his pearl, "like a dead fish's eye staring at one." He has many names and no abiding place, but he draws, compels one always. The reader feels him and sees him and has a curious, uncanny desire to follow him. With the Lady, one waits breathless his coming, and when at last he reappears and demands her—"That is the first bell for going on board. You must say yes or no"—we understand well the feeling with which she wrings her hands, "I must decide—decide for life." We know,

with her, that it is not the mere man that terrifies and attracts her, but the wide reaches behind him, the Sea and all that is therein. "To live on the sea—in the sea, even, who knows—we should be very much more perfect than we are, better and happier." She *must* go with him. "The summer-time is drawing to a close. The water ways will be locked."

The symbol tosses new pictures to light at each turn. In the opening scene, it is the picture that Lyngstrand is painting on the cliff, "Here by the rock in the foreground a half-dead mermaid is to be lying. She has wandered in from the sea and cannot find her way out. So she lies dying in the brackish water, you understand. . . . It was the lady of the house here who put it into my head to

paint something of the kind." Thus the first mention of the Lady strikes her note. Soon she is brought in again, by the artist, speaking to Hilda, "Yes, I was in the sea for a little while. I saw your mother there. She went into her bath-house." At last the Lady herself comes on the scene "with wet hair hanging over her shoulders." Wangel smiles and holds out his hands to meet her. "Well, here is our mermaid." This note, once unmistakably struck, is not sounded again till the very end of the play, when Ellida says (smiling but grave) "Well, Mr. Arnholm, you see—Do you recollect our talk yesterday? As, once for all, we have become land animals there is no way of escape out to sea again, nor to the life of the sea, either." And

Lyngstrand responds, "Why, that is exactly like my mermaid." There is no other mention of the mermaid in the five acts of the play. But the picture given at the start remains with one throughout the intervening lines. It fits into the sea and the story of the sea. It gives colour to Ellida's love for the sea, her longing for it, and her eager interest in every mention of it. When Lyngstrand relates the story of the American (the Stranger), of his crushing and crumpling the paper and tearing it into a thousand bits, his face as white as chalk—the paper that contained the news of her marriage—Ellida's interest and fear is not that of a mere woman who has broken her troth. Playing over and around her, in the imagination of the reader, is the picture of the mermaid who has wan-

dered in from the sea and lies dying in the brackish water.

It is, throughout, a play of pictures. They are constantly before the eye. The artist plans to paint a dead seaman returning and looking upon his betrothed as she lies asleep, so that even in her dreams she feels him there. Wangel says to Ellida, "Now I begin to understand you, little by little. You think and feel in pictures, in living images. Your longing and pining for the sea, its attraction for you, and the power of that stranger were the experience of your growing yearning for liberty, nothing else."

We, too, begin to understand, "little by little." Ibsen himself thinks and feels in pictures. He does not plan bare, architectural dramas, nor ingenious play and counterplay of events.

He "thinks and feels in pictures, *in living images;*" and these images reveal the soul, in whose action is centred the interest of the play.

The likeness of Ibsen's symbols to the Leading Motives in Wagner's music is inevitably suggested to the mind. No one familiar with Wagnerian opera and with Ibsen's dramatic form can fail to be struck by the kinship between the two. Of Wagner's method his biographer writes: "In his desire to make the singer's utterances intelligible, Wagner went so far as to call upon the orchestra for assistance, by making it, also, speak a language with a definite meaning. This he could only do by using Leading Motives—those reminiscent melodies or chords associated with a particular person, incident, or dramatic emotion, which

recur in the music whenever the person or dramatic idea with which they are associated recurs in the play or the singer's utterances. These definite orchestral Motives not only help to elucidate the plot, they also, by their subtle suggestiveness and emotional definiteness and vividness, help to atone to the spectator for the loss of those delicate shades of facial expression which is inevitable in our large modern opera-houses; and, thirdly, the system of Leading Motives has enabled Wagner to be the first composer who could convert an opera from a crude mosaic of unconnected "numbers" into a music-drama, all parts of which are as organically connected by means of recurrent melodies as the parts of the drama itself are by the recurrence of the same characters, with the same

thoughts, traits, and motives of action." One can easily transpose the description into terms of drama and symbol in Ibsen's work.

Of Wagner's process of musical composition Wagner himself says, "I remember that, even before I actually set to work upon the composition of *The Flying Dutchman*, I had sketched Senta's ballad in the second act, and elaborated it poetically and musically; into this piece I placed unconsciously the thematic germ of the whole musical score: it was the concentrated image of the whole drama, as it stood before my mind's eye." In composing the opera, he goes on to say, this condensed thematic scheme in his mind spread itself spontaneously as a connected web over the whole opera; all he had to do was to let the various thematic

germs contained in the ballad develop, each in its own direction, and the drama was complete. In adopting this new method, he followed an instinctive impulse inspired by the dramatic poem.

Wagner's Motives are musical characters, as Ibsen's are pictorial, and these musical characters "undergo the same emotional changes as the dramatis personæ themselves." In Ibsen, the symbols undergo like changes. The Hospital is carefully planned and built, and it burns. The Wild Duck, wounded, droops and pines in confinement, but at last seeks the nest of sticks and straws provided for her, and is finally sacrificed to the doom of the hapless Ekdal family. To Rita and to Allmers after Little Eyolf is drowned in the depths of the fiord, comes the

distant call of children from the beach below, "The crutch is floating—The crutch is floating."

"Every bar," writes Mr. Finck of *Tristan*, "betrays its source, just as every piece of a broken mirror reflects the same image." So every line of Ibsen's work reveals the drama from which it is taken. *The Lady from the Sea* has the colour and tone of the sea; *Ghosts* has its taint, and Hedda Gabler its hard shining surface. It is the close connection of plot and character and symbol that makes Ibsen's plays as perfect and unique and satisfying in the realm of dramatic art as are the operas of Wagner in that of music.

In each play, the symbol is introduced early in the action. In *Ghosts*, Engstrand and Regina, in

the first scene, refer to the completion of the hospital; in *Pillars of Society*, Aune, who is on the stage when the curtain rises, speaks of the *Indian Girl*, "that cursed American that's put in for repairs"; in *Rosmersholm*, Mrs. Helseth tells of the White Horses in the first scene. After its introduction, the symbol plays in and out through the drama, giving it colour and light and character—a thousand and one indefinable shades that could be given in no other way. Like the Flower-girl music in Parsifal,—"We hear it first when Gurnemanz, in his monologue, tells his companions about Klingsor's garden, and it arouses our curiosity regarding the damsels who are arrayed in such beautiful music. In the second act we see these girls, and are bathed in the fragrance of this

music in full blossom; and when subsequently a reminiscent strain is introduced it thrills us by its suggestive glimpse of the past as no mere words, and be they ever so poetic, could thrill us. Indeed, the poet's most imaginative figures of speech have not such suggestive power as these reminiscent Motives, which resemble them in function."

At the climax of the play the symbol appears for the last time. The Wild Duck is sacrificed by Hedvig at the point where she, in turn, is sacrificed for the Ekdal family and the family for humanity at large, and humanity to social conventions that stifle and cramp the best and purest impulses of human life; the Hospital burns at the critical moment when all Mrs. Alving's plans fall in pieces from her hands—

Parson Manders turns from her, Engstrand, takes his booty and departs, Regina gives notice. Mrs. Alving is left alone with the ruins of life smouldering beside her. Since the action of the play is psychological, the climax of the play, the psychological moment, coincides with the moment of decision. In each case there is a struggle—short or long, a moment of turning—either an acceptance of the fate that has overtaken one and a yielding to it voluntarily, or rebellion against it.

This coincidence of the psychological moment and the symbol is so constant, that one hesitating, in doubt as to the main symbol amid the many possible ones that spring to light in the close study of an Ibsen play, may decide the matter by turning to the climax of the action, the psy-

chological moment. There, inevitably, the symbol appears. It is the silent hinge on which the action turns, noiselessly, itself unseen, unguessed.

VIII

RELATION OF SYMBOLISM TO THE MEANING OF THE PLAY

OF the leading motives of Wagner's dramatic music, it has been said: "So close is the union of the poem and the music that in case of doubt as to the purport of the poem, the leading motives will throw light on it." Of the symbolism of Ibsen it may be said —so close is the union between symbol and meaning that in case of doubt the symbol will throw light on the meaning of the play.

The test is easily made. If one takes an unfamiliar play of Ibsen's and reads it for the meaning, he will per-

haps find himself puzzled, baffled, defeated. He may be unable to set forth the meaning in definite terms—and that, not only after one reading, but after two, or three, or four. If, however, he turns to the climax of the play and notes the symbol, the meaning of the play lies in his hand. He has only to apply the symbol in detail. As he applies it, the meaning constantly opens out, widens before him. New phases of it haunt the imagination. He is able to see much and far, not because he sees vaguely, but because he sees truly. Of the play of the *Master Builder*, Mr. Payne says, "When we come to ask what is the problem, what the type that the author has sought to portray, we are somewhat puzzled about our answer. It is, as far as the leading character is con-

cerned, a study in morbid psychology. But the type is highly complex, and does not readily lend itself to definition. . . . *The Master Builder* is no doubt one of the most puzzling plays that Ibsen has written."

M. Faguet, in an article written to disprove Georg Brandes's statement that there "is not a symbol in the whole of Ibsen," exclaims, "I should like to know the meaning of the house of a hundred stories built by Solness, the builder, from which he falls and breaks his neck. Is it not an image representative of his excessive ambition, of his aspirations toward an ideal that cannot be realized? Otherwise, wherefore the house?" As a matter of fact, the house that Solness built was not a hundred stories high. It was only the dwelling built for

himself and his wife, from the tower of which he falls and is taken up dead. And if the house is regarded as a symbol, the meaning of the play as a whole is no clearer than before. Say that it represents Solness's excessive ambitions—is then the *evil* of excessive ambition, the theme of Ibsen's play? And what part does Little Hilda play, who incites him to the last ambition of all? She is, surely, a lovable vision. Does Ibsen mean to present her as an evil influence? And Aline, the pale, shadowy wife, caring only for the things that were burned in the old house, the old portraits and the "silk dresses that had belonged to the family for generation and generations" and the lace and the jewels, "and then all the dolls. . . . I had nine lovely dolls,"—is she, the wife, who tries to

hold Solness back from his rash act, the real heroine of the piece,—with laces and jewels and dolls?

Mr. Payne is puzzled as to the problem of the *Master Builder*, because it has not occurred to him to read it through its symbol; and M. Faguet, insisting that there are hints of symbolic intent in the play, hits upon the house of a "hundred stories" to prove his point. But both leave the meaning as puzzling, as confused as before.

If, however, one seeking the meaning of the play, looks for the moment of decision, the climax, he finds it when Solness takes the wreath in his hand to mount the tower. The younger generation whisper that he will not dare. His wife has begged him not to do it. His physician has warned him. Only Hilda, "Little Hilda," has said

to him passionately, "I will have you do it! I will have it! (imploringly). Just once more, Master Builder! Do the *impossible* once again!" The moment of decision when he obeys her is the climax of the play. The climbing of the tower is the symbol. In this play, as in one or two others, the symbol is not an object but an act.

Throwing the light of the symbol upon the play, every detail of the meaning is etched. Solness is of the old order. He no longer advances. He has no longer the spirit of daring. He fears "the new generation" that is crowding upon him. He keeps them back. Ragnar, at his uncongenial office work, is the new order which will some day supplant him. Meantime he, the Master Builder, lives with fear in his heart. Then Hilda, the Spirit

of Daring, of creative, vital courage, comes to him out of the past.

She recalls to him that he had sworn to build for her a kingdom. She demands it of him, "on the table," with a pretty imperious rap of her knuckles. She inspires him. He forgets fear, the timorousness that belongs to the old, he forgets that he has not dared for years. He will climb to the top as he climbed that other morning to the top of the church spire where he stood face to face with God and defied him—"Hear me now, thou mighty one! From this day forward I will be a free builder—I too, in my sphere—just as thou in thine. I will never build any more churches for thee—only homes for human beings." Once more he will stand beside his maker—"Hear me, Mighty Lord—Thou may'st judge me

as seems best to thee. But hereafter I will build nothing but the loveliest thing in the world."

"Put not old wine into new bottles lest they burst and the wine be spilled." The old order cannot advance. It will not allow the new to supplant it. It "*cannot.*" It "*dare not.*" It can only hold its place, persistently, stubbornly, till, inspired by the memory of former deeds, it dares once more—the feeble flame flickers, flares high in the empty socket, and goes out forever.

One may press the symbol close: back into the furthest recesses of the play, it fits at every point. Without courage, without the creative spirit, children may not be born. The empty nurseries are swept and clean. The men of the new order who are to support him will never be those of his own

kin. That joy belongs only to men of vital force. But the women all serve him—the Past—each in her own way. Aline, the conservative wife, in the path of what she calls duty, holds him back at every point—a true woman, with her dolls and laces and hats. Kaia and Hilda, although of the "new generation," serve him, Kaia in practical things and Hilda with courage and sympathy. The men of the Future must look to the Future for help. Their womenkind will cling to the Past and serve it, and inspire it. and urge it to repeat itself; and when it fails and falls, Aline will mourn for it, and Hilda worship.

It is not the tone of a woman-hater. Ibsen neither hates nor loves. He looks with clear eyes and sees. The relation of woman to the social prob-

lem is a vital one. More and more this seems to have been borne in upon him. In *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* she is more or less a passive sufferer. But with *Rebecca West* she takes her place as a positive force in the social order, in the inevitable story—the struggle between old and new. In *Hedda Gabler* she works upon the destiny of the poet, and in the *Master Builder* on that of the man of affairs.

So far is the play from being a tract against excessive ambition, that its clear meaning is: Life must be lived with courage, with climbing and risks, else there is no happiness, no hope, no true success, no future. Solness's success is built upon the past and upon the ruins of the past. It came, almost by lucky accident, in the destruction of the old house; and as it came, so it may

go; there is no life in it, no vital force that can withstand the blow.

The symbol of the climbing of Solness is not a mere empty act, performed through vainglory for the admiring crowd. It is a symbol of the sublime act by which the builder at last, the plan conceived and carried out to its last detail, stands at the summit of success, face to face with his maker and demands of him a token. He has made himself equal with God. He has built churches in which men might worship God, and he has seen that they are as naught. He has built homes, happy homes for human beings; and "they are not worth six-pence." Now at last, he will build for beauty. With this new vision the old generation passes away. When a generation dares swings out into the

unknown, its destruction is written. Already the Future, the spirit of the Future, has overtaken it. The King is dead. Long live the King. Generations come and go, but the spirit is eternal. The new generation stands by, ready to take up the work. It is but slenderly equipped; Ragnar has only his handful of drawings, Hilda "the clothes she stands in"; but within them is a mighty force.

In *Little Eyolf* it is out of the great silence that Allmers comes. It was there that he had gone after his sin, to escape the sight of the child's eyes and the sound of the crutch. *Rita:* "Then that was why you went away this summer?" *Allmers* (with shining eyes): "Yes! I went up into the infinite solitudes. I saw the sun-

rise gleaming on the mountain peaks. I felt myself nearer the stars—I seemed to be almost in sympathy and communion with them. And then I found the strength for it." Out of the solitude, among the mountain peaks, he has learned the secret of living. He will no longer evade responsibility—the eyes shall be always with him, and the crutch. "I want henceforth to be father to Eyolf. . . . I will try to perfect all the rich possibilities that are dawning in his childish soul. I will foster all the noble germs in his nature—make them blossom and bear fruit." He will devote his life to making good the "injury that is incurable." When at last the boy is taken from him, lured out to sea by the Rat-Wife, he looks out over the fiord, demanding of Asta, "Where is my little Eyolf

now? [Smiling sadly to her.] Can you tell me that—my big, wise Eyolf? No one in all the world can tell me that. I know only this one terrible thing—that he is gone from me." This maimed soul, that he had vowed his life to, has been taken from him, out into the great sea, and he sits lonely by the fiord. "I like best to be alone."

The play is full of haunting symbolism that follows one—as the rats followed the Rat-Wife. Allmers has left the woman who could have been his soul's mate, not recognising her. She is his innocence, the higher nature with whom he might have lived forever, had he not been blind. He is won away from her by Rita, with her gold and her green forests, filling the senses to the brim. Out of this marriage is born little Eyolf, a new soul, the com-

pensation granted by the law of change. But this Eyolf, too, is unrecognised. There is no intentional wrong-doing—merely neglect, a turning away, a giving oneself up to the delights of the body, to the enjoyment of his gold and green forests, and forgetting the responsibility for the soul—the soul entrusted to them together—to the body and the spirit; and while they take their delight together the soul is crippled forever. Then remorse follows them, gnawing always—little Eyolf with his tapping crutch and haunting eyes. He joins them to the host of those who "cannot *keep soul and body* together on account of the rats and all the little rat-children, you understand, young master." Rita cannot bear to look at "his evil eyes." They follow her, as they follow Allmers. He is driven into the wilder-

ness by them ; she is driven to hatred of the child. But when Allmers returns from his journey, light has come to him. He has grown weary of the life of the senses—Rita's allurements have no power over him. He will devote his whole life to the child. He will make good, so far as he may, his terrible mistake. Little Eyolf longs always for the unattainable—to run and play like other boys, to swim and jump, to be a soldier, some day. Allmers will teach him to be content with what life still holds for him. He will nourish the crippled child and make of him a happy human being.

Then comes the Rat-Wife, the beneficent law of change, who takes away all the gnawing things, who with the help of Mopseman keeps sweet the earth,—for all things follow her, out

to the depths of the sea. Asta has seen her on the road, where the road-maker is at work—the road-maker who is to carry her away over the great sea; Allmers, in the mountains, has seen the face of the Rat-Wife; and now little Eyolf, too, sees her and slips away to follow her. He, the little gnawing thing, the remorse of Allmers's life, is drowned in the depths of the fiord. Then only, when remorse has been taken from him, does the man recognise what it has meant. He and Rita face each other with bitter accusation. Better, far better, the haunting eyes than this lonely separation of soul and body. But the law of change has taken the child, leaving empty loneliness. Allmers says farewell to them both—to Asta, his soul's mate, the ideal that haunted his way

and that he forsook for the joys of life, and to little Eyolf, the sweet child of remorse—when Asta brings to him the lilies, that "spring up from the depths of the fiord"—where it sweeps out to the sea.

Once more soul and body confront each other—earth-bound, alone. The soul longs to rush away into the solitude, to seek there "the peace and luxury of death." But the body holds it. Here it must work out salvation —here where it has sinned, with its gold and its green forests. The body, too, has yielded at last to the law of change. Together they will live the life that is appointed. Here "they will make peace with the great open eyes" —not by writing some learned book on "Human Responsibility," but by taking up the responsibilities that touch

them and crowd upon them—the neglected children, the Eyolfs of the street who have cried up to them, "The crutch is floating—the crutch is floating." "Then perhaps they will be around us—those whom we have lost—our little Eyolf and your big Eyolf, too. . . . Now and then perhaps we may still—on the way through life—have, as it were, a glimpse of them."

One cannot put the allegory into words. As well take a flower from the wayside—pistil and stamen and petal—and tear it apart, saying here is the heart of the blossom, this is what it meant when it sprang from the ground and hung swaying in the wind, a tremulous thing. The meaning hangs imprisoned in the symbol, swaying to the lightest breath, shaking out its perfume.

It is the fashion to speak of Ibsen as a pessimist. There is an air of almost patronising aloofness that sets his plays one side. "They are dangerous. They are depressing. They are morbid. There is no hope in them." If the interest centres in the chief character of the play, if it demands that a story "turn out well," some such criticism is inevitable. Solness falls from his tower. Nora leaves her home. ("From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing".) It shuts out hope, Oswald mumbles, "a helpless idiot, in his chair." Hedwig sacrifices her maimed life. One can go through the list. It is all gloom—if one demand that the play shall turn out well.

But in each of the plays a note of hope rings—faint and clear, like a

silver bell. And the note of hope, like the note of tragedy, has its symbol. This symbol, like the main symbol of the play, is closely inwrought with character and plot. It is introduced early in the play, usually after the main symbol, and it runs through to the end —past the main symbol, that is. Sometimes it is definitely presented in the last words of the play, as in *A Doll's House*—"the miracle of miracles"; in Oswald's toneless murmur—"The sun—the sun"; in Little Eyolf's "Upward—toward the peaks—toward the stars, toward the great silence"; and in Hilda's, "*My, my* Master-Builder"—at last he is hers. He was hers in the beginning of his career. He has missed her and yearned for her as she has missed and longed for him—though she *could not* come to him till

he called her in his heart. But, through all his building, she has been waiting for him and now at last she has claimed him. The note is that of optimism. Throughout *A Doll's House*, Nora refers, now and again, to a miracle that threatens. Torwald will take upon himself her suffering. "The miracle shall not be," she declares. The moment for the miracle strikes. The drapery falls from the god. He stands revealed—a sanctimonious prig. He has no power to save or to heal. But the note is not one of despair, only again the little ringing challenge to the future—"Oh, Torwald, then the miracle of miracles would have to happen." The play does not end with the closing of the door behind her. There is a peephole into the future—"the miracle of mir-

acles." Did any reader ever lay down the book with the sense that the play is finished? The imagination follows Nora out into the world, it returns to Torwald, seated with stiff, paralyzed legs amid the ruins of his doll's house. The play will never be finished so long as there are readers. Each day some new soul opens the book and lays it away—unfinished. "Forever wilt thou love and she be fair . . . happy melodist, unwearied, forever piping songs forever new."

The main symbol in an Ibsen play is retrospective. It throws light back upon the play and upon what has taken place before the play opens. The double symbol that accompanies it may be called the prospective symbol. Throughout the play it looks forward to what is to come and, at the end, its

light still shines upon the path ahead. The play of *Ghosts* has the two symbols cunningly interwoven. The hospital, which is to cure disease, to stand, a whitewashed monument, to wrongdoing, which is to prove to the world forever that out of evil good may come, is consumed with fire. Over against it, from end to end of the play, stands another symbol—the sun, source of light and life, wholesome, health-giving. When the play opens one catches, "through a glass wall a glimpse of a gloomy fiord-landscape, veiled by steady rain." It is a grey world the Alvings live in. Oswald's plaint is, again and again, of the greyness of life. He longs for the clear sunlight. It is his last faint call out of the recesses of idiocy—"Give me the sun, mother, the sun." The far-ring-

ing little bell is struck. It will not down. What the future holds, what hope there is, Ibsen may not be able to say—he may not choose to say. But the future is there. Over it shines the health-giving sun and out of it may come the miracle of miracles.

IX

IBSEN'S MESSAGE: COMPLETION OF THE RESURRECTION GROUP

AFTER *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen had abandoned the field of romance. For reasons that will be touched upon later, he could not remain an idealist. He had tried his hand at prose, in *The Young Men's League*, and failed signally—not only did the play displease his countrymen; it failed to satisfy his own artistic sense. After ten years of waiting, during which he completed and revised *Emperor and Galilean*—which is neither of the old order nor the new,—he published *Pillars of Society;* and after this,

every other year for twenty years, he produced a prose drama of similar order. These ten plays have a special import, both in Ibsen's artistic career and in his spiritual development. Up to this time he had devoted himself to romance—the Truth as it is visioned in the Ideal. Now he turned himself rigorously to the Real. Henceforth he would worship only the Real. He had bitter things to say.

In *Pillars of Society* he showed society as it exists, hampered by convention and deceit. *The Indian Girl*, unseaworthy and dangerous, is Bernick —the symbol of all society, seeking to cover up its defects and present a fair showing to the world under the plausible excuse that it is for the good of the whole. Bernick, in the end, comes to see his danger and confesses himself.

"Gather close around me, ye true and faithful women," he says at the last; "I have learned this in these days, it is you women who are the Pillars of Society." "Then you have learned poor wisdom, brother-in-law," responds Lona. "No, no, the spirits of Truth and Freedom—these are the 'Pillars of Society.'"

The last words of the play—Truth and Freedom, and the part the woman is to play, in connection with them, in the emancipation of society—these are the first words of the new message.

Nora Helmer, in *A Doll's House*, and Oswald in *Ghosts*, are only fresh illustrations of the theme of *Pillars of Society*. A rotten society that seeks to cover up rather than to tear away and expose to the light of the sun will produce women like Nora

with her hidden wound and melancholy dance, and sons like Oswald, sin-consumed and desperate. And they, in turn, are society itself. Society is a restless, flitting thing. It hides its wound, as best it can, and dances with smiling face. It is consumed with the sins of the past. It has no strength left for the sins it would sin itself.

Norwegian society did not like the countenance revealed in the mirror held up to Nature. It turned upon Ibsen with fury. He retorted in an *Enemy of the People.* He showed them as choosing rather to drink the polluted waters of the Baths of Convention than to cleanse them at the cost of money and convenience involved. They stoned the man who pointed out to them their faults and their danger. They would not correct

the faults. The *Wild Duck* is Hedvig, the Eckdal family, Society under the bonds of convention and deceit. Relling, who tries to make her contented with her lot, surrounding her in her attic with fusty Christmas trees and "life-lies," is her worst enemy. Gregers, the faithful dog plunging to rescue her from the depths of the ocean and only wounding her the more, is her natural foe. But better, far better, Gregers tearing away shams and conventions, exposing, even injuring, the naked flesh beneath, than Relling, the false idealist, the pretender, who would justify the life of deceit, glorify it, till it appears, to sun-darkened eyes, the very semblance of Nature's self—till the stir of prisoned wings beating the air of the dusty attic shall seem the wind of heaven.

The Wild Duck has a special interest, aside from the part it plays in the general development of Ibsen's thought, in that it is the play in which he has drawn himself in the character in which he is, for himself, permanently to remain. Gregers, the idealist turned practical, is Ibsen, the poet—turned prose writer and reformer—who "sits and dips his fingers in the purling stream—to wash them clean—gnawed and tortured by the thought that never, never will he succeed. Never in all eternity will he attain to freedom and the new life. He will remain forever prisoned in hell." Gregers knows his destiny—"to be always the thirteenth at table." He will never succeed. He has left the wild, free country where he has lived, isolated from real men and women, interested only in his

dreams and in "the claims of the ideal." He has brought these claims into the life of the real world and forced them upon men and women. They are hopelessly muddled by his efforts to save them. They cannot understand what he is talking about. But they can no longer be contented as they were. He cannot explain to them, if they cannot understand; and he cannot return to his solitude and his dreams. He can never be a poet again; and as a prose preacher he only makes himself and every one else uncomfortable. He is destined to be forever thirteenth at table—an unwelcome guest, himself wretched.

With *The Wild Duck* Ibsen has said his last word upon the society of his own time—its weakness, its pollution, its cowardice, and its blindness.

The plays that follow may apply to his own time and country, but they apply equally to society in all times and in every place. The scene is still laid in Norway, but the problems are those of all human nature. The chief of these problems is not a new one in Ibsen's thought. He has treated it at length in *Emperor and Galilean;* namely, the intimate relation of Past and Present—the inexorable hand of the Past ever pressing upon the Present, the fierce iconoclasm of the Present toward all that has preceded it. In *Rosmersholm* the theme is opened up. The White Horses of superstitution haunt the life of *Rosmersholm.* Rebecca and Rosmer would live in the light of freedom and truth, but the hand of the dead woman passes between them. The Present, however

pure its motive and aim, cannot shake off the Past. The conventions of the past hold us. We must make our peace with them. Freedom and truth will prevail at last, but not till many brave and daring souls have surrendered themselves voluntarily to the gods of the past. The conscience that we carry is not our own. It comes to us out of another life—often sick and feeble—but we must obey its voice for a while; for we ourselves are not our own. We too, have come out of the past, bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. We may not tear ourselves too hastily asunder lest life itself be endangered.

Ibsen recurs to this theme again in the *Master Builder* and yet again in *John Gabriel Borkman*. It seems to have fascinated him—Past and

Present can never live at peace, nor yet can they live apart—the struggle and the onward push of life over dead bodies—"the mixture of the two is a marvel and a curse," but for the most part a marvel. Throughout the plays one who reads beneath the surface finds tonic words. Life presses on, seemingly heartless and cruel, but the struggle is beautiful, could one but see it, and it makes ever toward free, full life. One must dare struggle, must dare even to join hands and be swept over the mill-dam, out to the flowing sea, if the struggle demands it.

The Lady from the Sea stands in significant relation to Ibsen's work as a whole. It is the last play of the great "group." In it he gives the final word of his message as a whole. The plays that follow—*Hedda Gabler*,

The Master Builder, *Little Eyolf*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*—are isolated plays, each treating of some phase of life that he has treated before. Up to *The Lady from the Sea*, that is, Ibsen's work is progressive. Each new play, whether in poetry or prose, has sounded a new note in the message. From this time on, the plays only repeat and elaborate what has already been said. So far as the Message is concerned, Ibsen's work stands complete with *The Lady from the Sea*. The plays that follow he himself has named "portrait plays." They are rich in meaning, but the structure of his life work is complete without them. As a poet he had revealed Love—the beauty and ideality of life—the spiritual truth that only love and idealism can inspire. With his poetry

this note ceases and he sets forth in his prose plays the evils of actual life, the sickness and foulness and desperate case of society and the hopelessness of health coming to it from without. Society will not listen, and even would it listen, the result would be only bewilderment and confusion. The remedy, if it is to come, must come from within. Human nature is rotting under convention and sham, but only from within can come the healing life that is to slough off the old and create for it a new body. Nor is the Past all evil. Present and Past must join hands in guarding the precious life that is to come—that is to go on forever. Each must voluntarily sacrifice something of itself—for the future.

The Lady from the Sea is the final word, most hopeful of all, and

beautiful, as the play itself is beautiful. The Lady is the human soul—belonging by nature to the wide, free life of the sea, belonging to elemental, primal things—who has "wandered in from the Sea and cannot find her way out again. and so she lies dying in the brackish waters"—of social convention. She longs always to return to free, open life. The Sea calls her as the solitude calls Allmers—but she is not a mermaid—a Thing. She is a free human being, with the power of choice. Only through free choice does the Soul find itself. The Sea calls, but the human soul is stronger than the Sea. The old, primal, isolated joys of being are sweet, but there is a greater joy for the Soul—a life in which by deliberate choice it shall find "itself," among other souls—one in the great sea of Humanity. It

is only for a time that society shall be an evil, soiled thing. For the Spirit that works through all things—through sea and earth and the human soul—shall work out at last the salvation of that soul and of society itself. But first there must come Two—making ready the way—Truth and Freedom.

X

PORTRAIT PLAYS

THE four plays that follow the great group are "portrait plays" in many senses. They are, on the surface, portraits of Norwegian society. It is in this sense that Ibsen refers to them under the cover of "portrait busts." But underneath them is "something equivocal, something cryptic." They are portraits of the human soul in its degradation and its possibilities. In *Hedda Gabler* it is the poet-nature of the soul that is studied. Lövborg, the poet—the spiritual side of human nature,—can only

come to fullest realisation of himself through love. The intellect tempts him away. She fascinates him. She stimulates him to wild frenzy, but she cannot inspire him. The body tempts him to passion and debauchery, and he yields to her, too. Between the intellect and the body—Hedda and Diana—he is destroyed body and soul. Only the torn fragments of his early vision are left. And out of these Thea sits trying to piece together something that may yet stand for the poet's soul. The message of the play came out of Ibsen's own life. It is the first sound of a cry that is repeated, bitterly, in *When We Dead Awaken.*

The symbol of the play has many phases. The manuscript is Lövborg's soul. And he, in turn, may be the poet-side of humanity, mutilated and

destroyed by the fierce touch of intellect and degraded by passion. Or the play may be a picture of society bent, as it were, upon destroying that which is most precious in it, with only Love, meek-voiced and fluttering, holding it to its true self. It may be a vivid presentation of Woman and the part she must bear in the regeneration of society. Man's destiny—the destiny of society—depends upon her. He will do whatever she decides. She may incite him, like Hedda, to wild daring, or degrade him, like Diana, or inspire him by love, to give the best of himself to the world. What she chooses for him to do, will be done. For man is a child in her hands.

Whichever meaning one selects and follows out through the details of the symbol, he will find that the other

meanings do not conflict with it. They only form a medium about it—an atmosphere. They lend it colour and tone. Through all the meanings one central norm remains—the soul of the poet, a sensitive responsive thing, in contact with circumstance, hard and unyielding and destructive.

The *Master Builder* and *Little Eyolf* have been discussed in Chapter VIII, in connection with the relation of the symbol to the meaning of the play. In both plays, there is portrayed the falling away of a soul from its first quick aspiration, an acceptance of low ideals in place of high, and an awakening at last, to a sense of failure. Solness, who once built with daring in his heart, has become a comfortable prosperous coward; but, at the last, he dares once more. Allmers, who

planned with Asta's help, a wonderful life-work, falls away, neglecting the joys of the spirit for those of the body; but, at the last he, too, faces the future, willing in his heart to go on. Both plays render an account of a soul worsted in the encounter with life and both end with a return to the ideal of an earlier time. The lesson speaks out of Ibsen's own life. He reads it to us from the pages that his fingers have turned, even now. We can trust him to the end to tell us clearly the lesson he finds, whether delight in the soul's new life, or unavailing regret for a soul lost.

Twin sisters, Ella Rentheim and Gunhild, fought for the possession of John Gabriel Borkman in his youth; and Gunhild, the one of hard, worldly wisdom, conquered—because he must

have money, and money would come to him through her. Money came, and success, but his ambition outran every achievement and led him at last to bankruptcy and theft and prison, where he remained five years. When the play opens, he has returned to his home; he passes his days in an upper gallery, pacing back and forth like a sick wolf. His wife, who has had no communication with him since his disgrace, sits in the room below, brooding on her injuries and planning how they may be avenged in the life of her son. The boy had been sent away from home at the time of his father's imprisonment, to his aunt, Ella Rentheim, who thus had the care of him up to his fifteenth year. Since that time, for eight years, he has lived at home—though he spends much of his time at his rooms in town. The

gloom and restraints of his home irritate him. Everything there looks toward the past and its failures. He belongs to the present and to the future. He is secretly planning to go away—escape from it all. His elopement, towards which the action of the play moves, is its symbol.

Again the struggle between Past and Present—but this time with something of the pathos of the struggle. The Present will escape. Even now it is planning a way. The sledge with the silver bells is ready. The charming comrade waits for him, and little Frida. The future stretches before them a shining track. The reader is glad that he is to go—wishes him God speed on the journey. He belongs to his own. Let him go with them. But the heart stays with those that are left behind—

shadows, all of them—Borkman and Ella Rentheim, facing each other through dim candle light in the upper gallery, reproaching each other, out of the shadows; standing together, at last, out on the open terrace, looking back over the dreamland of life—the land that lies buried in snow behind them. There are the steamships and factories—humming below, "working night and day." He can hear the sound of wheels—all the wealth he has created—the metal down in the mines that he longed to set free and that he still "loves, loves, loves." The pathos of his cry comes to one. It is a bitter fate to have outlived one's dream—whether of ambition, or ideal, or of cold, hard success—to be only a shadow groping in the cold that soon will clutch the heart and still it forever.

XI

CONFESSION

WITH *John Gabriel Borkman*, Ibsen completed his series of prose dramas. *When We Dead Awaken* he names *An Epilogue*. It stands in the relation of an epilogue, not merely to the prose dramas, but to all the work of his life. It is autobiographic—a cryptic revelation of the man and his work—a last hidden message to the world. He seems to have grown careless in his security. No one has discovered him thus far beneath the realism of his plays. He will speak once more, he will lay bare his soul. No one will understand.

If—as it seems to me—*When We Dead Awaken* is Ibsen's summing up of his dramatic work, no more scathing indictment of that work will ever be made than he himself has voluntarily embodied in the symbolism of the play. The symbol is the sculptured group called *The Resurrection Day.*

"Figured in the likeness of a young woman awakening from the sleep of death," it was to be the awakening of the noblest, purest, most ideal woman the world could know. "I wanted to embody the pure woman as I saw her awakening on the Resurrection Day. Not marvelling at anything new and unknown and undivined; but filled with sacred joy at finding herself unchanged—she, the woman of the earth—in the higher, freer, happier region—after the long, dreamless sleep of death. Thus did I fashion her. . . . The Resurrection, I thought, would be most beautifully and exquisitely figured as a

young, unsullied woman—with none of life's experiences—awakening to light and glory without having to put away from her anything ugly and impure."

The story deals with a Norwegian sculptor, Rubek, who in his youth has planned and executed this group statue. He has had, for help and inspiration in his work, a beautiful model who throws herself heart and soul into the work. When, however, she learns that the sculptor cares for her, not for herself, but only as a model for his art, she leaves him. He searches for her in vain. She has disappeared from the earth as effectually as if she were dead. The statue is practically complete. But when the sculptor returns to it he sees it with different eyes. His original conception changes gradually and he alters the group here and there, making it,

with each change, a little less beautiful, a little less idealistic. But when at last it is completed, and he sends it out into the world, it brings him fame and money. He has married, meantime, a young wife, a woman of somewhat realistic nature who delights in active life and in travel. They live in comfort in a beautiful villa he has built for her, or travel about the country. After the completion of *The Resurrection Day*, he does no work of importance. He makes, now and then, a portrait bust, but he does not plan another work like *The Resurrection Day*. He is restless and dissatisfied. He is gradually awakening to the fact that his nature demands that as long as he lives he shall create; but he has no inspiration for his work either in himself or in his wife. They travel about incessantly.

When the play opens, four or five years after their marriage, they are stopping at the Baths in a small sea-coast town in Norway. The scene is laid outside the Bath Hotel. The sculptor and his wife are "sitting in basket chairs beside a covered table on the lawn outside the hotel, having just breakfasted. They have champagne and seltzer-water on the table, and each has a newspaper. The sculptor is an elderly man of distinguished appearance. Maia, the wife, is quite young, with a vivacious expression and lively teasing eyes, yet with a suggestion of fatigue. She wears an elegant travelling dress."

The sculptor had married Maia, not because he loved her, but because he was lonely and disheartened. She, on her part, has never loved him. She consented to the marriage because he

promised her that she should travel with him and that—more alluring still—he would take her with him "up to a high mountain and show her all the glory of the world." This last promise he has never fulfilled. She has grown tired of delay, and the sculptor has wearied of her and her superabundant vitality. As they sit facing each other across the breakfast table in weariness of soul, she reminds him that since *The Resurrection Day* was completed he has lost all pleasure in his work.

Maia. You that used to be so indefatigable—working from morning to night!

Professor Rubek. (Gloomily). *Used* to be, yes.

Maia. But ever since you got your great masterpiece out of hand—

Professor Rubek. (Nods thoughtfully.) *The Resurrection Day.*

Maia. The masterpiece that has gone round the whole world, and made you so famous—

Professor Rubek. Perhaps that is just the misfortune, Maia.

Maia. How so?

Professor Rubek. When I had finished this masterpiece of mine (makes a passionate movement with his hand)—for *The Resurrection Day* is a masterpiece! Or was one in the beginning. No, it is one still. It *must, must, must* be a masterpiece.

Maia. (Looks at him in astonishment.) Why, Rubek, all the world knows *that.*

Professor Rubek. (Short, repellently.) All the world knows nothing! Understands nothing!

Maia. Well, at any rate it can divine something—

Professor Rubek. Something that is n't there at all; yes. Something that never was in my mind. Ah, yes, that they can all go into ecstasies over. (Growling to himself.) What is the good of working oneself

to death for the mob and the masses—for "all the world"!

Maia. Do you think it is better, then—do you think it is worthy of you, to do nothing at all but a portrait bust now and then!

Professor Rubek. (With a sly smile.) They are not exactly portrait busts that I turn out, Maia.

Maia. Yes, indeed they are—for the last two or three years—ever since you finished your great group and got it out of the house.

Professor Rubek. All the same, they are no mere *portrait* busts, I assure you.

Maia. What are they, then?

Professor Rubek. There is something equivocal, something cryptic, lurking in and behind these busts—a secret something that the people themselves cannot see.

It is at this point, perhaps, that the reader lifts a questioning glance—"something cryptic . . . lurking behind these busts." Can it be that Ibsen is speaking of himself? Is

Rubek the sculptor, only Ibsen in thin disguise?

The leaf is turned in impatience.

Professor Rubek. (Decisively.) I alone can see it. And it amuses me unspeakably. On the surface I give them the "striking likeness," as they call it, that they all stand and gape at in astonishment (lowers his voice), but at the bottom they are all respectable, pompous horse-faces, and self-opinionated donkey-muzzles, and lop-eared, low-browed dog-skulls, and fatted swine-snouts, and sometimes dull, brutal bull-fronts as well.

In a recent article on Ibsen there is the following description of his study table:

On the table beside his inkstand was a small tray. Its contents were extraordinary —some little carved wooden Swiss bears, a diminutive black devil, small cats, dogs, and

rabbits made of copper, one of which was playing a violin.

"I never write a single line of any of my dramas unless that tray and its occupants are before me on the table. I could not write without them. It may seem strange—perhaps it is—but I can not write without them," he repeated. "Why I use them is my own secret." And he laughed quietly.

Were they his models—these tiny, uncanny creatures—symbols of the souls of men and women and source of the inspiration that prompted these marvelous "portrait busts"—with their outer appearance of commonplace, everyday life and their cryptic meaning of dog-skulls and fattened swine-snouts and dull, brutal bull-fronts? All the dear domestic animals, in fact?

Professor Rubek. Simply the dear domestic animals, Maia. All the animals which men

have bedevilled in their own image, and which have bedevilled men in return.

In plain English—the free natural instincts of human nature which society has caught and imprisoned in convention and taught to work for it there, or play for it—instincts which society has bedevilled in its own image and which, in turn, have bedevilled it. "All the free play of the body and soul—caught in the net of diabolic convention and leering at one through the meshes of Ibsen's play—these commonplace, realistic plays—these portrait busts . . .

(with a sly smile) they are not exactly *portrait* busts that I turn out, Maia. . . . I alone see it. It amuses me unspeakably.

One has suspected it, all along, through the mazes of the plays—a cer-

tain sinister delight in the man, a quiet chuckling at our stupidity. And now, at the last, grown bold, he seems to flaunt it in our very faces as we "stand and gape in astonishment" . . .

"I alone can see it. It amuses me unspeakably."

It is his final word—the last will and testament of an artist, addressed to generations yet unborn—to those who will not stand and gape in astonishment at the striking likeness. For to them the likeness will be of no account. Those of whom he drew the likeness will be dead and gone; and they—those coming generations—will demand of him an artist's account of himself. . .

"Why did you abandon your high calling of poet to work upon these portrait busts? It was not poverty that

drove you, nor greed—surely not a desire to live comfortably—you who might have been the greatest poet of your age!"

It is before this tribunal that Ibsen speaks. *When We Dead Awaken* is his brief.

The history of Rubek might be that of Ibsen's own soul. One has a sense, as he reads, almost of prying, of having come upon something in an elder brother's chest—among his private papers—something intended, not for the eyes of his contemporaries, but only for the eyes of his spiritual children, and for those—long after his death. It is a confession of defeat, utter and humiliating.

"Yes, but let me tell you, too, how I have placed myself in the group. In front, beside a fountain, as it were, sits a man

weighed down with guilt, who cannot quite free himself from the earth-crust. I call him 'Remorse for a Ruined Life.' He sits there and dips his fingers in the purling stream—to wash them clean—and he is gnawed and tortured by the thought that never, never will he succeed. Never in all eternity will he attain to freedom and the new life. He will remain forever prisoned in his hell."

In his youth when the sculptor had planned *The Resurrection Day*, the model Irene had embodied for him all the beauty of the conception and had suggested to him constantly new beauties. "You were no model to me. You were the fountain head of my achievement." She aided him in his work "joyously, so gladly and ungrudgingly."—"Yes with all the pulsing blood of my youth I served you." She revealed herself to him "in all her

naked loveliness." But when she saw that he cared for her only as a model for his art, she who had given her very soul to help him—she went away and left him—"for his own sake."

She, this wonderful model, did she not come to Ibsen, too, in his youth—the Spirit of Love and Ideality? Through her help he planned and carried out the great work of his life—his poetic dramas. The beauty of Love, the power of Love, and the ultimate, wonderful resurrection of Love on the earth—these are the themes of the great song that ends with Brand and *Peer Gynt*. Then, because he loved not Love for herself, because he did not need her for himself, but only as an inspiration for his art, she left him, cold and desolate and uninspired. He searched for her everywhere, as the

sculptor searches for Irene, but she had gone from him. The man who will be merely artist, shall be *artist* and nothing more. Love will not serve those who do not live for her, and in her, and to whom she is not the breath of life.

In his loneliness the sculptor weds Maia; in his despair when the spirit of Love has left him, when he can no longer, through her inspiration, see beautiful poetic visions, Ibsen makes terms with the spirit of Realism—it was not an easy or natural adjustment on either side.

Maia. Do you remember what you promised me the day we came to an understanding on that difficult subject?

Professor Rubek. The subject of our marriage; yes. It was rather a hard matter for you, Maia.

He had known that he ought not to

wed her. But he was very desolate. The Spirit of Love had left him. He could no longer see beauty in the world, nor ideality, nor poetry. But Truth was still left—Maia. Perhaps he could live with her and forget. So they had joined their lives.

And now, after four or five years, they face each other across the breakfast table in weariness of soul. But release is at hand—nearer than they dream. Already the sculptor has had a vision of a white figure walking in the garden at night; and already the bear-hunter, who is to carry off little Maia to his huge wild country, is on his way. She will be at home with him, the great Russian, with his dogs, gulping their raw meat and licking bloody chops. Realism belongs to him by right. She will go with him gladly.

Presently we shall hear her song floating among the hills:

> I am free! I am free! I am free!
> No more life in the prison for me!
> I am free as a bird, I am free!

She has never belonged to Ibsen. She could not stay with him contentedly, though he has given her "more spacious and distinguished surroundings —in more polished society than she was accustomed to at home." He has polished realism, given it all the advantages of art; but in his heart of hearts he has never believed in her.

"You are not really born to be a mountaineer, little Maia."—"Yet at one time you seemed to think I was."—"Four or five years ago; yes (stretching himself in his chair); four or five years—it's a long, it's a long, long time, Maia."

He is very weary of her. She, on

her part, is deeply offended. He has never dealt fairly with her. She has possibilities—her own. They will never be realized in a poet's comfortable home. She, too, longs for the high places. But he will never take her there. In his heart of hearts he despises her. She belongs to the great Russian. With him she can be her beautiful free self.

Rubek watches her go without a sigh. For the other has returned to him. The Spirit of Love—of beauty and poetry and ideality—has come again out of the past, to seek him. She is like a dead person, it is true.

Her face is pale and its lines seem to have stiffened; the eyelids are drooped, and the eyes appear as though they saw nothing. Her dress, of fine, cream-white cashmere, comes down to her feet, and clings to her body in

perpendicular folds. Over her head, neck, breast, shoulders, and arms, she wears a large shawl of white crape. She keeps her arms crossed on her breast. She carries her body immovably, and her steps are stiff and measured.

He watches her breathless. "Who is that?" he demands of the innkeeper. "She is a stranger who has rented the little pavilion there." But to Rubek she is no stranger. He goes some steps toward her and says in a low voice: "I know you quite well, Irene."

They talk together of the past. It is the sculptor—Ibsen's self—communing in his heart with the Spirit that has left him so long, but has come again at last. She will never leave him again. He will cherish her in his heart, warm her there, hold her fast to the end.

The sculptor tells her of his life—

how the group has gone out into the world.

Irene. I will make a pilgrimage to the place where my soul and my child's soul lie buried.

Professor Rubek. (Uneasy and alarmed.) You must never see that statue again! Do you hear, Irene! I implore you! Never, never see it again!

Irene. Perhaps you think it would mean death to me a second time?

Professor Rubek. (Clenching his hands together.) Oh, I don't know what I think. But how could I ever imagine that you would fix your mind so immovably on that statue? You, who went away from me—before it was completed.

Irene. It was completed. That was why I could go away from you—and leave you alone.

Professor Rubek. (Sits with his elbows upon his knees, rocking his head from side to side, with his hands before his eyes.) It was not what it afterwards became.

Irene. (Quietly, but quick as lightning, half unsheathes a narrow-bladed, sharp knife, which she carries in her breast, and asks, in a hoarse whisper:) Arnold, have you done any evil to our child?

Professor Rubek. (Evasively.) Any evil? How can I be sure what you would call it?

Irene. (Breathless.) Tell me at once what you have done to the child!

Professor Rubek. I will tell you if you will sit and listen quietly to what I say.

Irene. (Hides the knife.) I will listen as quietly as a mother can when she—

Professor Rubek. (Interrupting.) And you must not look at me while I am telling you.

Irene. (Moves to a stone behind his back.) I will sit here behind you. Now tell me.

Professor Rubek. (Takes his hands from before his eyes and gazes straight in front of him.) When I had found you, I knew at once how I should make use of you for my life-work.

Irene. *The Resurrection Day* you called your life-work. I call it "our child."

Professor Rubek. I was young then—with no experience of life. The Resurrection, I thought, would be most beautifully and exquisitely figured as a young, unsullied woman—with none of life's experiences—awakening to light and glory without having to put away from her anything ugly and impure.

Irene. (Quickly.) Yes—and so I stand there now, in our work?

Professor Rubek. (Hesitating.) Not absolutely and entirely so, Irene.

Irene. (In rising excitement.) Not absolutely? Do I not stand as I always stood for you?

Professor Rubek. (Without answering.) I learned worldly wisdom in the years that followed, Irene. *The Resurrection Day* became in my mind's eye something more and something—more complex. The little round pedestal on which your figure stood erect and solitary—it no longer afforded room for all the imagery I now wanted to add.

Irene. (Gropes for her knife, but desists.)

What imagery did you add, then? Tell me!

Professor Rubek. I imaged that which I saw with my eyes around me in the world. I had to include it; I could not help it, Irene. I expanded the pedestal, made it wide and spacious; and on it I placed a segment of the curving, bursting earth. And up from the fissures of the soil there now swarm men and women with dimly suggested animal faces. Women and men, as I knew them in real life.

She does not resent that reality is there—women and men as he has known them—if in the midst of it, she, the chief figure, Love, stands radiant with the joy of light.

He confesses, reluctantly,—he has had to move her a little back for the sake of the general effect. "Otherwise it would have dominated the whole too much."

She yields even this to him. "But the joy in the light still transfigures

my face?" When day dawns and Love rises from her long sleep, it must be with the joy of light about her, illuminating everything. Sorrow may be there, and evil, but the light of Love will illumine all.

"Yes, it does, Irene—in a way. A little subdued, perhaps, as my altered idea required."

She challenges him. She rises before him. She questions, "That represents life as you see it?"

Reluctantly he admits it, "Yes, I suppose it does."

She confronts him. The vision of Love, once so radiant to his eyes, she accuses him, "has been shifted back, toned down—to serve as a background figure in a group—"

He protests here—"not a background figure, but a figure not quite in

the foreground." Other things come before the vision of Love in his art. He has admitted it now at last.

She turns upon him to strike him.

Irene. There you uttered your own doom.

Professor Rubek. (Turns and looks at her.) Doom?

Irene. (Hastily hides the knife and says, as though choked with agony.) My whole soul—you and I—we, we, we and our child were in that solitary figure.

Professor Rubek. (Eagerly, taking off his hat and drying the drops of sweat upon his brow.) Yes but let me tell you, too, how I placed myself in the group. In front, beside a fountain, as it were, sits a man weighed down with guilt, who cannot quite free himself from the earth-crust. I call him "Remorse for a Ruined Life." He sits there and dips his fingers in the purling stream—to wash them clean —and he is gnawed and tortured by the thought that never, never will he succeed. Never in all eternity will he attain to freedom

and the new life. He will remain forever prisoned in his hell.

The autobiographic note is not forced, but one may read it between the lines. It is Ibsen's life history. . . . His spontaneous, bubbling delight in his early work when the Spirit of Love and belief in love possessed him—the very lines and rhymes of *Peer Gynt* testify to it. The free rollicking metre and the lines that have taxed translators to the utmost reveal the soul of the poet in love with his work and working with spontaneous touch. The theme is ever, the divine power of Love that must dawn at last upon the earth. Then—when *Peer Gynt* was done—the anxious halting pause that came in his work, his fumbling attempt at prose in *The Young Men's League*, and the revising of his earlier work—all the

time searching for the Spirit that had left him, and without whom he finds himself powerless to create. He takes up *Emperor and Galilean.* The form is poetical, but the soul of poetry is not there. It has escaped him forever. He will never find it again. He knows it now. The *Emperor and Galilean* has taught him the truth. It stands there in the midst of his work, a great, bare, pretentious thing—neither prose nor poetry. Despair is in his heart. He stays his hand. His work is done.

There is still the desire in his heart, the necessity in his nature to create, but he is sterile. He can no longer make poems. The Spirit has left him. Beauty has gone from the world, and ideality. It is a cold, barren place, with only men and women, ugly and

hard and prosaic, leering at him. Then comes the whisper in his ear. They throng upon his soul, these men and women of the real world, hard and cruel and cunning. His keen eyes pierce them to their very souls, as through transparent walls of glass. Why should he not write of them as he sees them—reveal them to themselves? He writes *Pillars of Society*. He "places it as a segment of the curving, bursting earth" on the pedestal of his life-work. "Up from the fissures of the soil swarm men and women with dimly suggested animal faces." *A Doll's House* follows and *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of Society*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*. The group is complete at last and he gives it to the world. The world praises him and blames him, but for the most part, it

admires the skill, "the striking likeness," of the work of the pedestal—the faces that swarm from the fissures of the soil.

The rest of his works—*Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*—are but portrait plays, thrown off from time to time because he must still create. They have no inner unity that joins them to each other. And with *John Gabriel Borkman* he finds that even this sort of work is no longer possible to him.

Professor Rubek. (Continuing undisturbed.) I live at such high speed, Maia. We live so, we artists. I, for my part, have lived through a whole lifetime in the few years we two have known each other. I have come to realise that I am not at all adapted for seeklng happiness in indolent enjoyment. Life does not shape itself that

way for me and those like me. I must go on working—producing one work after another—right up to my last day. (Forcing himself to continue.) That is why I cannot get on with you any longer, Maia—not with you alone.

Maia. (Quietly.) Does that mean in plain language, that you have grown tired of me?

Professor Rubek. (Bursts forth.) Yes, that is what it means! I have grown tired—intolerably tired and fretted and unstrung—in this life with you. Now you know it. (Controlling himself.)

These are hard, ugly words I am using. I know that very well. And you are not at all to blame in this matter—that I willingly admit. It is simply and solely I myself, who have once more undergone a revolution (half to himself)—an awakening to my real life.

Maia. (Involuntarily folding her hands.) Why in all the world should we not part then?

Professor Rubek. (Looks at her in as-

tonishment.) Should you be willing to?

Maia. (Shrugging her shoulders.) Oh, yes; if there 's nothing else for it, then—

Professor Rubek. (Eagerly.) But there is something else for it. There is an alternative.

Maia. (Holding up her forefinger.) Now you are thinking of the pale lady again?

Professor Rubek. Yes; to tell the truth, I cannot help constantly thinking of her. Ever since I met her again. (A step nearer her.) For now I will tell you a secret, Maia.

Maia. Well?

Professor Rubek. (Touching his own breast.) In here, you see—in here I have a little Brahma-locked casket. And in that casket all my sculptor's visions are stored up. But when she disappeared and left no trace, the lock of the casket snapped to. And she had the key, and she took it away with her. You, little Maia, you had no key; so all that the casket contains must lie unused. And the years pass! And I have no means of getting at the treasure.

Maia. (Trying to repress a subtle smile.) Then get her to turn the key for you again.

She is not jealous of returning love. Surely in all the poets' great house—in all Ibsen's work—there must be room for Realism and Idealism, too. If not, then Realism will part from him entirely. She will be free. It is her nature. Forms and bonds weary her. She has never lived with him joyously. He has made too formal, too artistic a thing of her. She loves better the rough Russians, without a touch of art. With them the free spirit of truth can dwell willingly and all its native beauty can come out. "No need to be anxious about that, Professor Rubek!" Suddenly she points off to the right, "Look there! There we have her."

Professor Rubek. (Turning.) Where?

Maia. Out on the plain. Striding like a marble statue. She is coming this way.

Professor Rubek. (Stands gazing with his hand over his eyes.) Does not she look like the Resurrection incarnate? (To himself.) And her I could displace—and move into the shade! Remodel her! Fool that I was!

Irene. She—the other one—said that you had been waiting for me.

Professor Rubek. I have waited for you year after year, without myself knowing it.

Irene. I could not come to you, Arnold. I was lying sleeping there, the long, deep, dreamful sleep.

Professor Rubek. But now you have awakened, Irene.

Irene. (Shakes her head.) I have the heavy, deep sleep still in my eyes.

Professor Rubek. You shall see that day will dawn and lighten for us both.

Irene. Do not believe that.

Professor Rubek. (Urgently.) I do be-

lieve it! And I know it! Now that I have found you again.

Irene. Risen from the grave.

Professor Rubek. Transfigured!

Irene. Only risen, Arnold. Not transfigured. (He crosses over to her by means of stepping-stones below the cascade.)

Irene. (After a short interval of silence.) I have come back to you from the uttermost regions, Arnold.

Professor Rubek. Aye, truly, from an endless journey.

Irene. Come home to my lord and master.

Professor Rubek. To our home—to our own home, Irene.

Irene. Have you looked for me every single day?

Professor Rubek. How dared I look for you?

Irene. (With a sidelong glance.) No, I suppose you dared not. For you understood nothing.

Professor Rubek. Was it really not for the sake of some one else that you all of a

sudden disappeared from me in that way?

Irene. Might it not quite well be for your sake, Arnold?

Professor Rubek. (Looks doubtfully at her.) I don't understand you.

Irene. When I had served you with my soul and with my body, when the statue stood there finished—our child as you called it—then I laid at your feet the most precious sacrifice of all—by effacing myself for all time.

Then comes the pretty play of the flower petals floating. Irene, as she launches them, one by one, recalls to him, out of memory, how they played the game, once before, by the lake, and her white gulls were the swans that drew his boat, and he was Lohengrin, bringing the heavenly message to men. Love would have piloted him safely, but he cut his boat adrift from her. The white gulls sailed away. His boats are stranded on the shoals.

But he "has ships in reserve," He has pulled down the old hut where he dwelt with Love; but he has now a spacious mansion. He begs her to come and live with him, with him and Maia—to unlock once more his heart.

"I have no longer the key." She cannot dwell with him. But they will spend together one night on the Uplands.

Professor Rubek. A summer night on the Uplands. With you. With you. (His eyes meet hers.) Oh, Irene, that might have been our life. And that we have forfeited—we two.

Irene. We see the irretrievable only when —(Breaks short off).

Professor Rubek. (Looks inquiringly at her.) When?

Irene. When we dead awaken.

Professor Rubek. (Shakes his head mournfully.) What do we really see then?

Irene. We see that we have never lived.

Maia. (Is heard singing triumphantly among the hills.)

I am free! I am free! I am free!
No more life in the prison for me!
I am free as a bird. I am free!

Interwoven with the main symbol of the play is the figure of the dark attendant who appears for the first time, when Irene appears, and follows her close.

"Quite dark like a shadow"—"A dark one? Quite black perhaps?"—"Yes, it certainly seemed so to me."—"And behind the white figure? Following close upon her?"—"Yes, at a little distance."—"Aha! then I think I can explain the mystery. It is the Sister of Mercy, in black with the silver cross hanging by a chain on her breast. She has the air of a servant. She keeps her brown, piercing eyes incessantly fixed upon the lady."

Religion—the Church—follows al-

ways close upon the footsteps of the white figure—cherishing and keeping alive in the world the Spirit of Love—and Ideality and Truth—but cherishing it most devotedly when it is most nearly dead, when vitality has gone from it.

When Love—the life-giving principle of art and truth is frozen and lifeless, then the Church takes it into her care, watching over it humbly, feeding it on milk and water, keeping her piercing brown eyes constantly fixed upon it, to preserve and guard it lest it slip away from earth. She follows Irene—a shadow through the play—peering out at her warningly when life comes back a little to the deadened heart, and warmth to the clay-cold limbs. Irene, with returning life, shrinks from her, rebellious—

Irene. A face is staring out at me.

Professor Rubek. Where? Ah! (The Sister of Mercy's head is partly visible among the bushes beside the descent to the left. Her eyes are immovably fixed upon Irene.)

Irene. (Whispering.) One fine, sunny morning I shall kill her.

Professor Rubek. Would you do that?

Irene. With the utmost delight—if only I could manage it.

Professor Rubek. Why do you want to?

Irene. Because she deals in witchcraft. (Mysteriously.) Only think, Arnold, she has changed herself into my shadow.

Professor Rubek. (Trying to calm her.) Well, well, well—a shadow we must all have.

Irene. I am my own shadow. (With an outburst.) Do you not understand that?

Professor Rubek. (Sadly.) Yes, yes, Irene, I understand it.

The sculptor understands it. The reader understands vaguely—Love is ultimate. She resents the Church fol-

lowing her always—a little at a distance. She herself is her own shadow—Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The Spirit of Love—which is the spirit of life and of art, the soul beneath all things, the spiritual truth, and the inner vision that sees the truth—Love is jealous that any should come before her, or after. She would be all in all. If a man will trust her and live in her, he shall know all things. . . . The symbol branches out into intricate paths that the mind cannot follow all at once. But only when one has taken time to follow each to its last minute wandering, will he understand fully the message that Ibsen has projected in *When We Dead Awaken*.

It is perhaps the chief characteristic of Ibsen's symbolism, compared with that of the other writers, that the

symbol stands the test of minute following out, that it demands it, and that it rewards it richly. Every play is full of meanings within meanings. They suggest themselves hazily on the first reading. *When We Dead Awaken*, for instance, may be the autobiography of Ibsen's soul. But it suggests also the essential truths that must govern art in its relations with realism and idealism—the inner nature of each, the conditions that each demands for its best development, and the relation of the artist to each. There is, too, more than a suggestion of woman's relation to art—the feminine element that must join with the masculine ere true art is born—the same theme that is touched on in *Hedda Gabler*, and the *Master Builder* and *Little Eyolf* —the study of which in Ibsen's work might form

a book by itself. But more than this, there is in the play, history—running through the lines, Maia and the bear-hunter recount, each, a parable. The bear-hunter took once a maiden from the gutter and bore her in his arms close to his heart; for her shoes were worn thin. But she rewarded him with unfaithfulness. One must know the whole history of literature to interpret the parable. But the parable in which Realism answers him is the story of her own life with Ibsen. She was "a stupid girl, who had both a father and a mother, but a rather poverty-stricken home. Then there came a high and mighty seigneur into the midst of all this poverty. And he took the girl in his arms,—as you did—and travelled far, far away with her."

Ulfheim. Was she so anxious to be with him?

Maia. Yes; for she was stupid, you see.

Ulfheim. And he, no doubt, was a brilliant and beautiful personage?

Maia. Oh, no; he was n't so superlatively beautiful. But he pretended that he would take her with him to the top of the highest mountains where there was light and sunshine without end.

Ulfheim. So he was a mountaineer, was he, that man?

Maia. Yes, he was—in his way.

Ulfheim. And then he took the girl up with him?

Maia. (With a toss of the head.) Took her up with him finely, you may be sure! Oh no! He beguiled her into a cold, clammy cage where, it seemed to *her*, there was neither sunlight nor fresh air, but only gilding and great petrified ghosts of people all round the walls.

The sculptor has failed to keep his

promise, and now she will go with the bear-hunter who assures her that he has a castle for her. She demurs.

"Thanks! I have had enough of castles." —"With splendid hunting-grounds, stretching for miles around it."—"Are there works of art, too, in this castle?"—"Well, no—it's true there are no works of art; but——". —"Ah! that's one good thing at any rate!"

She has had enough of castles and art at Ibsen's hand. She is wary of being caught again. Realism and art cannot live together.

They turn to descend the mountain, the bear-hunter and Maia, pledged to each other for life. But the way is blocked. The sculptor and Irene are coming up. So it comes about that they meet on the Uplands in the early morning, before the sunrise.

Each has a final word to say—

the bear-hunter to Ibsen, a word of surprise that he has reached the Uplands at last. "It is a deadly dangerous way that you have come—for you come to a tight place where you can neither get forward nor back. And there you stick fast, Professor! Mountain-fast, as we hunters call it."—"Am I to take these as oracular utterances?" Without doubt. The dead centre of Ibsen's life swings before the vision—the ten years in which he could do nothing. And the twenty years in which he groped helplessly for the opening. But he is here—at last—on the Uplands. A storm is coming, but he is here. "Dauntless, the slug-horn to his lips he set and blew, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.' "

The bear-hunter and Maia turn hastily to descend the mountain. The

sculptor, with Irene's hand in his, faces the storm. "We must first pass through the mists, Irene, and then——"

We must first pass through the mists. Then we shall stand face to face with our Beloved. Then at last we shall know her as she is. Here we see through a glass darkly. But there face to face.

The storm is upon them. They are whirled along buried in the masses of snow drifting on the high peaks. Maia's voice—earth-child, happy in her freedom—is singing about them. Religion reaches out empty, groping hands to them.

The poet and his Truth have gone from us. His lips are silent. They are forever sealed.

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